ARNOLD BENNETT

MATADOR OF FIVE TOWNS

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THE MATADOR OF THE FIVE TOWNS

THE MATADOR OF THE FIVE TOWNS AND OTHER STORIES

BY

ARNOLD BENNETT

AUTHOR OF "THE OLD WIVES' TALE,"
"BURIED ALIVE," ETC.

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All the stories here given are now published for the first time in volume form in the United States. A number of them, however, have previously appeared in volume form in England.

A. B.

THE DOG

THIS is a scandalous story. It scandalised the best people in Bursley; some of them would wish it forgotten. But since I have begun to tell it I may as well finish. Moreover, like most tales whispered behind fans and across club-tables, it carries a high and valuable moral. The moral — I will let you have it at once — is that those who love in glass houses should pull down the blinds.

I

He had got his collar on safely; it bore his name — Ellis Carter. Strange name for a dog, perhaps; and perhaps it was even more strange that his collar should be white. But such dogs are not common dogs. He tied his necktie exquisitely; caressed his hair again with two brushes; curved his young moustache, and then assumed his waistcoat and his coat; the trousers had naturally preceded the collar. He beheld the suit in the glass, and saw that it was good. And it was not built in London, either. There are tailors in Bursley. And in particular there is the dog's tailor. Ask the dog's tailor, as the dog once did, whether he can really do as well as London, and he will smile on you with gentle pity; he will not

stoop to utter the obvious Yes. He may casually inform you that, if he is not in London himself, the explanation is that he has reasons for preferring Bursley. He is the social equal of all his clients. He belongs to the dog's club. He knows, and everybody knows, that he is a first-class tailor with a first-class connection, and no dog would dare to condescend to him. He is a great creative artist; the dogs who wear his clothes may be said to interpret his creations. Now, Ellis was a great interpretative artist, and the tailor recognised the fact. When the tailor met Ellis on Duck Bank greatly wearing a new suit, the scene was impressive. It was as though Elgar had stopped to hear Paderewski play "Pomp and Circumstance" on the piano.

Ellis descended from his bedroom into the hall, took his straw hat, chose a stick, and went out into the portico of the new large house on the Hawkins, near Oldcastle. In the neighbourhood of the Five Towns no road is more august, more correct, more detached, more umbrageous, than the Hawkins. M. P.'s live there. It is the link between the aristocratic and antique aloofness of Oldcastle and the solid commercial prosperity of the Five Towns. Ellis adorned the portico. Young (a bare twenty-two), fair, handsome, smiling, graceful, well-built, perfectly groomed, he was an admirable and a characteristic specimen of the race of dogs which, with the modern growth of luxury and the Luxurious Spirit, has become so marked a phenomenon in the social development of the once barbarous Five Towns.

When old Jack Carter (reputed to be the best turner that Bursley ever produced) started a little potbank near St. Peter's Church in 1861 — he was then forty, and had saved two hundred pounds — he little dreamt that the supreme and final result after forty years would be the dog. But so it was. Old Jack Carter had a son John Carter, who married at twenty-five and lived at first on twenty-five shillings a week, and enthusiastically continued the the erection of the fortune which old Jack had begun. At thirty-three, after old Jack's death, John became a Town Councillor. At thirty-six he became Mayor and the father of Ellis, and the recipient of a silver cradle. Ellis was his wife's maiden name. At forty-two he built the finest earthenware manufactory in Bursley, down by the canal-side at Shawport. At fifty-two he had been everything that a man can be in the Five Towns — from County Councillor to President of the Society for the Prosecution of Felons. Then Ellis left school and came to the works to carry on the tradition, and his father suddenly discovered him. The truth was that John Carter had been so laudably busy with the affairs of his town and county that he had nearly forgotten his family. Ellis, in the process of achieving doghood, soon taught his father a thing or two. And John learnt. John could manage a public-meeting, but he could not manage Ellis. Besides, there was plenty of money; and Ellis was so ingratiating, and had curly hair that somehow won sympathy. And, after all, Ellis was not such a duffer as all that

at the works. John knew other people's sons who were worse. And Ellis could keep order in the paintresses' "shops" as order had never been kept there before.

John sometimes wondered what old Jack would have said about Ellis and his friends, those handsome dogs, those fine dandies, who taught to the Five Towns the virtue of grace and of style and of dash, who went up to London — some of them even went to Paris — and brought back civilisation to the Five Towns, who removed from the Five Towns the reproach of being uncouth and behind the times. Was the outcome of two generations of unremitting toil merely Ellis? (Ellis had several pretty sisters, but they did not count.) John could only guess at what old Jack's attitude might have been towards Ellis — Ellis, who had his shirts made to measure. He knew exactly what was Ellis's attitude towards the ideals of old Jack, old Jack the class-leader, who wore clogs till he was thirty, and dined in his shirt-sleeves at one o'clock to the end of his life.

Ellis quitted the portico, ran down the winding garden-path, and jumped neatly and fearlessly on to an electric tramcar as it passed at the rate of fifteen miles an hour. The car was going to Hanbridge, and it was crowded with the joy of life; Ellis had to stand on the step. This was the Saturday before the first Monday in August, and therefore the formal opening of Knype Wakes, the most carnivalesque of all the carnivals which enliven the four seasons in the Five Towns. It is still called Knype Wakes, be-

cause once Knype overshadowed Hanbridge in importance; but its headquarters are now quite properly at Hanbridge, the hub, the centre, the Paris of the Five Towns — Hanbridge, the county borough of sixty odd thousand inhabitants. It is the festival of the masses that old Jack sprang from, and every genteel person who can leaves the Five Towns for the seaside at the end of July. Nevertheless, the district is never more crammed than at Knype Wakes. And, of course, genteel persons, whom circumstances have forced to remain in the Five Towns, sally out in the evening to " do " the Wakes in a spirit of tolerant condescension. Ellis was in this case. His parents and sisters were at Llandudno, and he had been left in charge of the works and of the new house. He was always free; he could always pity the bondage of his sisters; but now he was more free than ever — he was absolutely free. Imagine the delicious feeling that surged in his heart as he prepared to plunge himself doggishly into the wild ocean of the Wakes. By the way, in that heart was the image of a girl.

II

He stepped off the car on the outskirts of Hanbridge, and strolled gently and spectacularly into the joyous town. The streets became more and more crowded and noisy as he approached the marketplace, and in Crown Square tramcars from the four quarters of the earth discharged tramloads of humanity at the rate of two a minute, and then glided

off again empty in search of more humanity. The lower portion of Crown Square was devoted to tramlines; in the upper portion the Wakes began, and spread into the market-place, and thence by many tentacles into all manner of streets.

No Wakes is better than Knype Wakes; that is to say, no Wakes is more ear-splitting, more terrific, more dizzying, or more impassable. When you go to Knype Wakes you get stuck in the midst of an enormous crowd, and you see roundabouts, swings, switchbacks, myrioramas, atrocity booths, quack dentists, shooting-galleries, cocoanut-shies, and bazaars, all around you. Every establishment is jewelled, gilded, and electrically lighted; every establishment has an orchestra, most often played by steam and conducted by a stoker; every establishment has a steam-whistle, which shrieks at the beginning and at the end of each round or performance. You stand fixed in the multitude listening to a thousand orchestras and whistles, with the roar of machinery and the merry din of car-bells, and the popping of rifles for a background of noise. Your eyes are charmed by the whirling of a million lights and the mad whirling of millions of beautiful girls and happy youths under the lights. For the roundabouts rule the scene; the roundabouts take the money. The supreme desire of the revellers is to describe circles, either on horseback or in yachts, either simple circles or complex circles, either up and down or straight along, but always circles. And it is as though inventors had sat up at nights puzzling their brains how best to

make revellers seasick while keeping them equidistant from a steam-orchestra. . . . Then the crowd solidly lurches, and you find yourself up against a dentist, or a firm of wrestlers, or a roundabout, or an ice-cream refectory, and you take what comes. You have begun to "do" the Wakes. The splendid insanity seizes you. The lights, the colours, the explosions, the shrieks, the feathered hats, the pretty faces as they fly past, the gilding, the statuary, the August night, and the mingling of a thousand melodies in a counterpoint beyond the dreams of Wagner — these things have stirred the sap of life in you, have shown you how fine it is to be alive, and, careless and free, have caught up your spirit into a heaven from which you scornfully survey the year of daily toil between one Wakes and another as the eagle scornfully surveys the potato-field. Your nostrils dilate — nay, matters reach such a pass that, even if you are genteel, you forget to condescend.

III

After Ellis had had the correct drink in the private bar up the passage at the Turk's Head, and after he had plunged into the crowd and got lost in it, and submitted good-humouredly to the frequent ordeal of the penny squirt as administered by adorable creatures in bright skirts, he found himself cast up by the human ocean on the macadam shore near a shooting-gallery. This was no ordinary shooting-gallery. It was one of Jenkins's affairs (Jenkins of Manchester), and on either side of it Jenkins's Ven-

etian gondolas and Jenkins's Mexican mustangs were whizzing round two of Jenkins's orchestras at twopence a time, and taking thirty-two pounds an hour. This gallery was very different from the old galleries, in which you leaned against a brass bar and shot up a kind of a drain. This gallery was a large and brilliant room, with the front-wall taken out. It was hung with mirrors and cretonnes, it was richly carpeted, and, of course, it was lighted by electricity. Carved and gilded tables bore a whole armoury of weapons. You shot at tobacco-pipes, twisting and stationary, at balls poised on jets of water, and at proper targets. In the corners of the saloon, near the open, were large crimson plush lounges, on which you lounged after the fatigue of shooting.

A pink-clad girl, young and radiant, had the concern in charge.

She was speeding a party of bankrupt shooters, when she caught sight of Ellis. Ellis answered her smile, and strolled up to the booth with a countenance that might have meant anything. You can never tell what a dog is thinking.

"'Ello!" said the girl prettily (or, rather, she shouted prettily, having to compete with the two orchestras). "You here again?"

The truth was that Ellis had been there on the previous night, when the Wakes was only half-opened, and he had come again to-night expressly in order to see her; but he would not have admitted, even to himself, that he had come expressly in order to see her; in his mind it was just a chance that he

might see her. She was a jolly girl. (We are gradually approaching the scandalous part.)

"What a jolly frock!" he said, when he had shot five celluloid balls in succession off a jet of water.

Smiling, she mechanically took a ball out of the basket and let it roll down the conduit to the fountain.

"Do you think so?" she replied, smoothing the fluffy muslin apron with her small hands, black from contact with the guns. "That one I wore last night was my second-best. I only wear this on Saturdays and Mondays."

He nodded like a connoisseur. The sixth ball had sprung up to the top of the jet. He removed it with the certainty of a King's Prize winner, and she complimented him.

"Ah!" he said, "you should have seen me before I took to smoking and drinking!"

She laughed freely. She was always showing her fine teeth. And she had such a frank, jolly countenance, not exactly pretty — better than pretty. She was a little short and a little plump, and she wore a necklace round her neck, a ring on her dainty, dirty finger, and a watch-bracelet on her wrist.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "How old are you?"

"How old are *you?*" he retorted.

Dogs do not give things away like that.

"I'm nineteen," she said submissively. "At least, I shall be come Martinmas."

And she yawned.

"Well," he said, "a little girl like you ought to be in bed."

"Sunday to-morrow," she observed.

"Aren't you glad you're English?" he remarked. "If you were in Paris you'd have to work Sundays too."

"Not me!" she said. "Who told you that? Have you been to Paris?"

"No," he admitted cautiously; "but a friend of mine has, and he told me. He came back only last week, and he says they keep open Sundays, and all night sometimes. Sunday is the great day over there."

"Well," said the girl kindly, "don't you believe it. The police wouldn't allow it. I know what the police are."

More shooters entered the saloon. Ellis had finished his dozen; he sank into a lounge, and elegantly lighted a cigarette, and watched her serve the other marksmen. She was decidedly charming, and so jolly — with him. He noticed with satisfaction that with the other marksmen she showed a certain high reserve.

They did not stay long, and when they were gone she came across to the lounge and gazed at him provocatively.

"Dashed if she hasn't taken a fancy to me!"

The thought ran through him like lightning.

"Well?" she said.

"What do you do with yourself Sundays?" he asked her.

"Oh, sleep."

"All day?"

"All morning."

"What do you do in the afternoon?"

"Oh, nothing."

She laughed gaily.

"Come out with me, eh?"

"To-morrow? Oh, I should LOVE TO!" she cried.

Her voice expanded into large capitals because by a singular chance both the neighbouring orchestras stopped momentarily together, and thus gave her shout a fair field. The effect was startling. It startled Ellis. He had not for an instant expected that she would consent. Never, dog though he was, had he armed a girl out on any afternoon, to say nothing of Sunday afternoon, and Knype's Wakes Sunday at that! He had talked about girls at the club. He understood the theory. But the practice ——

The foundation of England's greatness is that Englishmen hate to look fools. The fear of being taken for a ninny will spur an Englishman to the most surprising deeds of courage. Ellis said "Good!" with apparent enthusiasm, and arranged to be waiting for her at half-past two at the Turk's Head. Then he left the saloon and struck out anew into the ocean. He wanted to think it over.

Once, painful to relate, he had thoughts of failing to keep the appointment. However, she was

so jolly and frank. And what a fancy she must have taken to him! No, he would see it through.

IV

If anybody had prophesied to Ellis that he would be driving out a Wakes girl in a dog-cart that Sunday afternoon he would have laughed at the prophet; but so it occurred. He arrived at the Turk's Head at two twenty-five. She was there before him, dressed all in blue, except the white shoes and stockings, weighing herself on the machine in the yard. She showed her teeth, told him she weighed nine stone one, and abruptly asked him if he could drive. He said he could. She clapped her hands and sprang off the machine. Her father had bought a new mare the day before, and it was in the Turk's Head stable, and the yardman said it wanted exercise, and there was a dogcart and harness idling about, and, in short, Ellis should drive her to Sneyd Park, which she had long desired to see.

Ellis wished to ask questions, but the moment did not seem auspicious.

In a few minutes the new mare, a high and somewhat frisky bay, with big shoulders, was in the shafts of a high, green dogcart. When asked if he could drive, Ellis ought to have answered: "That depends — on the horse." Many men can tool a fifteen-year-old screw down a country lane who would hesitate to get up behind a five-year-old animal (in need of exercise) for a spin down Broad Street, Hanbridge, on Knype Wakes Sunday. Ellis could drive; he

could just drive. His father had always steadfastly refused to keep horses, but the fathers of other dogs were more progressive, and Ellis had had opportunities. He knew how to take the reins, and get up, and give the office; indeed, he had read a hand-book on the subject. So he took the reins and got up, and the Wakes girl got up.

He chirruped. The mare merely backed.

"Give 'er 'er mouth," said the yardman disgustedly.

"Oh!" said Ellis, and slackened the reins, and the mare pawed forward.

Then he had to turn her in the yard, and get her and the dogcart down the passage. He doubted whether he should do it, for the passage seemed a size too small. However, he did it, or the mare did it, and the entire organism swerved across a portion of the footpath into Broad Street.

For quite a quarter of a mile down Broad Street Ellis blushed, and kept his gaze between the mare's ears. However, the mare went beautifully. You could have driven her with a silken thread, so it seemed. And then the dog, growing accustomed to his prominence up there on the dogcart, began to be a bit doggy. He knew the little thing's age and weight, but, really, when you take a girl out for a Sunday spin you want more information about her than that. He asked her name, and her name was Jenkins — Ada. She was the great Jenkins's daughter.

("Oh," thought Ellis, "the deuce you are!")

"Father's gone to Manchester for the day, and aunt's looking after me," said Ada.

"Do they know you've come out — like this?"

"Not much!" She laughed deliciously. "How lovely it is!"

At Knype they drew up before the Five Towns Hotel and descended. The Five Towns Hotel is the greatest hotel in North Staffordshire. It has two hundred rooms. It would not entirely disgrace Northumberland Avenue. In the Five Towns it is august, imposing, and unique. They had a lemonade there, and proceeded. A clock struck; it was a near thing. No more refreshments now until they had passed the three-mile limit!

Yes! Not two hundred yards further on she spied an ice-cream shop in Fleet Road, and Ellis learnt that she adored ice-cream. The mare waited patiently outside in the thronged street.

After that the pilgrimage to Sneyd was punctuated with ice-creams. At the Stag at Sneyd (where, among ninety-and-nine dog-carts, Ellis's dogcart was the brightest green of them all) Ada had another lemonade, and Ellis had something else. They saw the Park, and Ada giggled charmingly her appreciation of its beauty. The conversation throughout consisted chiefly of Ada's teeth. Ellis said he would return by a different route, and he managed to get lost. How anyone driving to Hanbridge from Sneyd could could arrive at the mining village of Silverton is a mystery. But Ellis arrived there, and he ultimately came out at Hillport, the aristocratic suburb of Burs-

ley, where he had always lived till the last year. He feared recognition there, and his fear was justified. Some silly ass, a schoolmate, cried, "Go it!" as the machine bowled along, and the mischief was that the mare, startled, went it. She went it down the curving hill, and the vehicle after her, like a kettle tied to a dog's tail.

Ellis winked stoutly at Ada when they reached the bottom, and gave the mare a piece of his mind, to which she objected. As they crossed the railway-bridge a goods-train ran underneath and puffed smoke into the mare's eyes. She set her ears back.

"Would you!" cried Ellis authoritatively, and touched her with the whip (he had forgotten the handbook).

He scarcely touched her, but you never know where you are with any horse. That mare, which had been a mirror of all the virtues all the afternoon, was off like a rocket. She overtook an electric car as if it had been standing still. Ellis sawed her mouth; he might as well have sawed the funnel of a locomotive. He had meant to turn off and traverse Bursley by secluded streets, but he perceived that safety lay solely in letting her go straight ahead up the very steep slope of Oldcastle Street into the middle of the town. It would be an amazing mare that galloped to the top of Oldcastle Street! She galloped nearly to the top, and then Ellis began to get hold of her a bit.

"Don't be afraid," he said masculinely to Ada.

And, conscious of victory, he jerked the mare to the left to avoid an approaching car. . . .

The next instant they were anchored against the roots of a lamp-post. When Ellis saw the upper half of the lamp-post bent down at right angles, and pieces of glass covering the pavement, he could not believe that he and his dogcart had done that, especially as neither the mare, nor the dogcart, nor its freight, was damaged. The machine was merely jammed, and the mare, satisfied, stood quiet, breathing rapidly.

But Ada Jenkins was crying.

And the car stopped a moment to observe. And then a number of chapel-goers on their way to the Sytch Chapel, which the Carter family still faithfully attended, joined the scene; and then a policeman.

Ellis sat like a stuck pig in the dogcart. He knew that speech was demanded of him, but he did not know where to begin.

The worst thing of all was the lamp-post, bent, moveless, unnatural, atrociously comic, accusing him.

The affair was over the town in a minute; the next morning it reached Llandudno. Ellis Carter had been out on the spree with *a Wakes girl* in a dogcart on Sunday afternoon, and had got into such a condition that he had driven into a lamp-post at the top of Oldcastle Street just as people were going into chapel.

The lamp-post remained bent for three days — a fearful warning to all dogs that doggishness has limits.

If it had not been a dogcart, and such a high, green dogcart; if it had been, say, a brougham, or even a

cab! If it had not been Sunday! And, granting Sunday, if it had not been just as people were going into chapel! If he had not chosen that particular lamp-post, visible both from the market-place and St. Luke's Square! If he had only contrived to destroy a less obtrusive lamp-post in some unfrequented street! And if it had not been a Wakes girl — if the reprobate had only selected for his guilty amours an actress from one of the touring companies, or even a star from the Hanbridge Empire — yea, or even a local barmaid! But *a Wakes girl!*

Ellis himself saw the enormity of his transgression. He lay awake astounded by his own doggishness.

And yet he had seldom felt less doggy than during that trip. It seemed to him that doggishness was not the glorious thing he had thought. However, he cut a heroic figure at the dog's club. Every admiring face said: "Well, you *have* been going the pace! We always knew you were a hot un, but, really ——"

V

On the following Friday evening, when Ellis jumped off the car opposite his home on the Hawkins, he saw in the road, halted, a train of vast and queer-shaped waggons in charge of two traction-engines. They were painted on all sides with the great name of Jenkins. They contained Jenkins's roundabouts and shooting-saloons, on their way to rouse the joy of life in other towns. And he perceived

in front of the portico the high, green dogcart and the lamp-post-destroying mare.

He went in. The family had come home that afternoon. Sundry of his sisters greeted him with silent horror on their faces in the hall. In the breakfast-room, which gave off the drawing-room, was his mother in the attitude of an intent listener. She spoke no word.

And Ellis listened, too.

"Yes," a very powerful and raucous voice was saying in the drawing-room, "I reckoned I'd call and tell ye myself, Mister Carter, what I thought on it. My gell, a motherless gell, but brought up respectable; sixth standard at Whalley Range Board School, and her aunt a strict God-fearing woman! And here your son comes along and gets hold of the girl while her aunt's at the special service for Wakes folks in Bethesda Chapel, and runs off with her in my dogcart with one of my hosses, and raises a scandal all o'er the Five Towns. God bless my soul, mister! I tell'n ye I hardly liked to open o' Monday afternoon, I was that ashamed! And I packed Ada off to Manchester. It seems to me that if the upper classes, as they call 'em — the immoral classes *I* call 'em — 'ud look after themselves a bit instead o' looking after other people so much, things might be a bit better, Mister Carter. I dare say you think it's nothing as your son should go about ruining the reputation of any decent, respectable girl as he happens to fancy, Mister Carter; but this is what I say. I say ——"

Mr. Carter was understood to assert, in his most pacific and pained public-meeting voice, that he regretted, infinitely regretted ——

Mrs. Carter, weeping, ran out of the breakfast-room.

And soon afterwards the traction-engines rumbled off, and the high, green dogcart followed them.

Ellis sat spell-bound.

He heard the parlourmaid go into the drawing-room and announce, "Tea is ready, sir!" and then his father's dry cough.

And then the parlourmaid came into the breakfast-room: "Tea is ready, Mr. Ellis!"

Oh, the meal!

THE ELIXIR OF YOUTH

IT was Monday afternoon of Bursley Wakes — not our modern rectified festival, but the wild and naïve orgy of seventy years ago, the days of bear-baiting and of bull-baiting, from which latter phrase, they say, the town derives its name. In those times there was a town-bull, a sort of civic beast; and a certain notorious character kept a bear in his pantry. The "beating" (baiting) occurred usually on Sunday mornings at six o'clock, with formidable hungry dogs; and little boys used to look forward eagerly to the day when they would be old enough to be permitted to attend. On Sunday afternoons colliers and potters, gathered round the jawbone of a whale which then stood as a natural curiosity on the waste space near the corn-mill, would discuss the fray, and make bets for next Sunday, while the exhausted dogs licked their wounds, or died. During the Wakes week bull and bear were baited at frequent intervals, according to popular demand, for thousands of sportsmen from neighbouring villages seized the opportunity of the fair to witness the fine beatings for which Bursley was famous throughout the country of the Five Towns. In that week the Wakes took possession of the town, which yielded itself with savage abandonment to all the frenzies of license. The public-houses remained continuously

open night and day, and the barmen and barmaids never went to bed; every inn engaged special "talent" in order to attract custom, and for a hundred hours the whole thronged town drank, drank, until the supply of coin of George IV., converging gradually into the coffers of a few persons, ceased to circulate. Towards the end of the Wakes, by way of a last ecstasy, the cockfighters would carry their birds, which had already fought and been called off, perhaps, half a dozen times, to the town-field (where the discreet 40 per cent. brewery now stands), and there match them to a finish. It was a spacious age.

On this Monday afternoon in June the less fervid activities of the Wakes were proceeding as usual in the market-place, overshadowed by the Town Hall — not the present stone structure with its gold angel, but a brick edifice built on an ashlar basement. Hobby-horses and revolving swing-boats, propelled, with admirable economy to the proprietors, by privileged boys who took their pay in an occasional ride, competed successfully with the skeleton man, the fat or bearded woman, and Aunt Sally. The long toy-tents, artfully roofed with a tinted cloth which permitted only a soft, mellow light to illuminate the wares displayed, were crowded with jostling youth and full of the sound of whistles, "squarkers," and various pipes; and multitudes surrounded the gingerbread, nut, and savoury stalls which lined both sides of the roadway as far as Duck Bank. In front of the numerous boxing-booths experts of the "fancy," obviously out of condition, offered to fight

all comers, and were not seldom well thrashed by impetuous champions of local fame. There were no photographic studios and no cocoanut-shies, for these things had not been thought of; and to us moderns the fair, despite its uncontrolled exuberance of revelry, would have seemed strangely quiet, since neither steam-organ nor hooter nor hurdy-gurdy was there to overwhelm the ear with crashing waves of gigantic sound. But if the special phenomena of a later day were missing from the carnival, others, as astonishing to us as the steam-organ would have been to those uncouth roisterers, were certainly present. Chief, perhaps, among these was the man who retailed the elixir of youth, the veritable *eau de jouvence,* to credulous drinkers at sixpence a bottle. This magician, whose dark mysterious face and glittering eyes indicated a strain of Romany blood, and whose accent proved that he had at any rate lived much in Yorkshire, had a small booth opposite the watch-house under the Town Hall. On a banner suspended in front of it was painted the legend:

THE INCA OF PERU'S
ELIXER OF YOUTH
SOLD HERE.
ETERNAL YOUTH FOR ALL.
DRINK THIS AND YOU WILL NEVER GROW OLD
AS SUPPLIED TO THE NOBILITY & GENTRY
SIXPENCE PER BOT.
WALK IN, WALK IN, &
CONSULT THE INCA OF PERU.

The Inca of Peru, dressed in black velveteens, with a brilliant scarf round his neck, stood at the door of his tent, holding an empty glass in one jewelled hand, and with the other twirling a long and silken moustache. Handsome, graceful, and thoroughly inured to the public gaze, he fronted a small circle of gapers like an actor adroit to make the best of himself, and his tongue wagged fast enough to wag a man's leg off. At a casual glance he might have been taken for thirty, but his age was fifty and more — if you could catch him in the morning before he had put the paint on.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Bursley, this enlightened and beautiful town which I am now visiting for the first time," he began in a hard, metallic voice, employing again with the glib accuracy of a machine the exact phrases which he had been using all day, "look at me — look well at me. How old do you think I am? How old do I seem? Twenty, my dear, do you say?" and he turned with practised insolence to a pot-girl in a red shawl who could not have uttered an audible word to save her soul, but who blushed and giggled with pleasure at this mark of attention. "Ah! you flatter, fair maiden! I look more than twenty, but I think I may say that I do not look thirty. Does any lady or gentleman think I look thirty? No! As a matter of fact, I was twenty-nine years of age when, in South America, while exploring the ruins of the most ancient civilisation of the world — of the world, ladies and

gentlemen — I made my wonderful discovery, the Elixir of Youth!"

"What art blethering at, Licksy?" a drunken man called from the back of the crowd, and the nickname stuck to the great discoverer during the rest of the Wakes.

"That, ladies and gentlemen," the Inca of Peru continued unperturbed, "was — seventy-two years ago. I am now a hundred and one years old precisely, and as fresh as a kitten, all along of my marvellous elixir. Far older, for instance, than this good dame here."

He pointed to an aged and wrinkled woman, in blue cotton and a white mutch, who was placidly smoking a short cutty. This creature, bowed and satiate with monotonous years, took the pipe from her indrawn lips, and asked in a weary, trembling falsetto:

"How many wives hast had?"

"Seventane," the Inca retorted quickly, dropping at once into broad dialect, "and now lone and lookin' to wed again. Wilt have me?"

"Nay," replied the crone. "I've buried four mysen, and no man o' mine shall bury me."

There was a burst of laughter, amid which the Inca, taking the crowd archly into his confidence, remarked:

"I've never administered my elixir to any of my wives, ladies and gentlemen. You may blame me, but I freely confess the fact;" and he winked.

"Licksy! Licksy!" the drunken man idiotically chanted.

"And now," the Inca proceeded, coming at length to the practical part of his ovation, "see here!" With the rapidity of a conjurer he whipped from his pocket a small bottle, and held it up before the increasing audience. It contained a reddish fluid, which shone bright and rich in the sunlight. "See here!" he cried magnificently, but he was destined to interruption.

A sudden cry arose of "Black Jack! Black Jack! 'Tis him! He's caught!" And the Inca's crowd, together with all the other crowds filling the market-place, surged off eastward in a dense, struggling mass.

The cynosure of every eye was a springless clay-cart, which was being slowly driven past the newly-erected "big house" of Enoch Wood, Esquire, towards the Town Hall. In this cart were two constables, with their painted staves drawn, and between the constables sat a man securely chained — Black Jack of Moorthorne, the mining village which lies over the ridge a mile or so east of Bursley. The captive was a ferocious and splendid young Hercules, tall, with enormous limbs and hands and heavy black brows. He was dressed in his soiled working attire of a collier, the trousers strapped under the knees, and his feet shod in vast clogs. With open throat, small head, great jaws, and bold beady eyes, he look what he was, the superb brute — the brute

reckless of all save the instant satisfaction of his desires. He came of a family of colliers, the most debased class in a lawless district. Jack's father had been a colliery-serf, legally enslaved to his colliery, legally liable to be sold with the colliery as a chattel, and legally bound to bring up all his sons as colliers, until the Act of George III. put an end to this incredible survival from the customs of the Dark Ages. Black Jack was now a hero to the crowd, and knew it, for those vast clogs had kicked a woman to death on the previous day. She was a Moorthorne woman, not his wife, but his sweetheart, older than he; people said that she nagged him, and that he was tired of her. The murderer had hidden for a night, and then, defiantly, surrendered to the watch, and the watch were taking him to the watch-house in the ashlar basement of the Town Hall. The feeble horse between the shafts of the cart moved with difficulty through the press, and often the coloured staves of the constables came down thwack on the heads of heedless youth. At length the cart reached the space between the watch-house and the tent of the Inca of Peru, where it stopped while the constables unlocked a massive door; the prisoner remained proudly in the cart, accepting, with obvious delight, the tribute of cheers and jeers, hoots and shouts, from five thousand mouths.

The Inca of Peru stood at the door of his tent and surveyed Black Jack, who was not more than a few feet away from him.

"Have a glass of my elixir," he said to the death-

dealer; "no one in this town needs it more than thee, by all accounts. Have a glass, and live for ever. Only sixpence."

The man in the cart laughed aloud.

"I've nowt on me — not a farden," he answered, in a strong grating voice.

At that moment a girl, half hidden by the cart, sprang forward, offering something in her outstretched palm to the Inca; but he, misunderstanding her intention, merely glanced with passing interest at her face, and returned his gaze to the prisoner.

"I'll give thee a glass, lad," he said quickly, "and then thou canst defy Jack Ketch."

The crowd yelled with excitement, and the murderer held forth his great hand for the potion. Using every art to enhance the effect of this dramatic advertisement, the Inca of Peru raised his bottle on high, and said in a loud, impressive tone:

"This precious liquid has the property, possessed by no other liquid on earth, of frothing twice. I shall pour it into the glass, and it will froth. Black Jack will drink it, and after he has drunk it will froth again. Observe!"

He uncorked the bottle and filled the glass with the reddish fluid, which after a few seconds duly effervesced, to the vague wonder of the populace. The Inca held the glass till the froth had subsided, and then solemnly gave it to Black Jack.

"Drink!" commanded the Inca.

Black Jack took the draught at a gulp, and instantly flung the glass at the Inca's face. It missed

him, however. There were signs of a fracas, but the door of the watch-house swung opportunely open, and Jack was dragged from the cart and hustled within. The crowd, with a crowd's fickleness, turned to other affairs.

That evening the ingenious Inca of Peru did good trade for several hours, but towards eleven o'clock the attraction of the public-houses and of a grand special combined bull and bear beating by moonlight in the large yard of the Cock Inn drew away the circle of his customers until there was none left. He retired inside the tent with several pounds in his pocket and a god's consciousness of having made immortal many of the sons and daughters of Adam.

As he was counting out his gains on the tub of eternal youth by the flicker of a dip, someone lifted the flap of the booth and stealthily entered. He sprang up, fearing robbery with violence, which was sufficiently common during the Wakes; but it was only the young girl who had stood behind the cart when he offered to Black Jack his priceless boon. The Inca had noticed her with increasing interest several times during the evening as she loitered restless near the door of the watch-house.

"What do you want?" he asked her, with the ingratiating affability of the rake who foresees everything.

"Give me a drink."

"A drink of what, my dear?"

"Licksy."

He raised the dip, and by its light examined her face. It was a kind of face which carries no provocative signal for nine men out of ten, but which will haunt the tenth: a child's face with a passionate woman's eyes burning and dying in it — black hair, black eyes, thin pale cheeks, equine nostrils, red lips, small ears, and the smallest chin conceivable. He smiled at her, pleased.

"Can you pay for it?" he said pleasantly.

The girl evidently belonged to the poorest class. Her shaggy, uncovered head, lean frame, torn gown, and bare feet, all spoke of hardship and neglect.

"I've a silver groat," she answered, and closed her small fist tighter.

"A silver groat!" he exclaimed, rather astonished. "Where did you get that from?"

"He give it me for a-fairing yesterday."

"Who?"

"Him yonder"— she jerked her head back to indicate the watch-house —"Black Jack."

"What for?"

"He kissed me," she said boldly; "I'm his sweetheart."

"Eh!" The Inca paused a moment, startled. "But he killed his sweetheart yesterday."

"What! Meg!" the girl exclaimed with deep scorn. "Her weren't his true sweetheart. Her druv him to it. Serve her well right! Owd Meg!"

"How old are you, my dear?"

"Don't know. But feyther said last Wakes I

was fourtane. I mun keep young for Jack. He wunna have me if I'm owd."

"But he'll be hanged, they say."

She gave a short, satisfied laugh.

"Not now he's drunk Licksy — hangman won't get him. I heard a man say Jack'd get off wi' twenty year for manslaughter, most like."

"And you'll wait twenty years for him?"

"Yes," she said; "I'll meet him at prison gates. But I mun be young. Give me a drink o' Licksy."

He drew the red draught in silence, and after it had effervesced offered it to her.

"'Tis raight?" she questioned, taking the glass.

The Inca nodded, and, lifting the vessel, she opened her eager lips and became immortal. It was the first time in her life that she had drunk out of a glass, and it would be the last.

Struck dumb by the trusting joy in those profound eyes, the Inca took the empty glass from her trembling hand. Frail organism and prey of love! Passion had surprised her too young. Noon had come before the flower could open. She went out of the tent.

"Wench!", the Inca called after her, "thy groat!"

She paid him and stood aimless for a second, and then started to cross the roadway. Simultaneously there was a rush and a roar from the Cock yard close by. The raging bull, dragging its ropes, and followed by a crowd of alarmed pursuers, dashed out. The girl was plain in the moonlight. Many others

were abroad, but the bull seemed to see nothing but her, and, lowering his huge head, he charged with shut eyes and flung her over the Inca's booth.

"Thou's gotten thy wish: thou'rt young for ever!" the Inca of Peru, made a poet for an instant by this disaster, murmured to himself as he bent with the curious crowd over the corpse.

Black Jack was hanged.

Many years after all this Bursley built itself a new Town Hall (with a spire, and a gold angel on the top in the act of crowning the bailiwick with a gold crown), and began to think about getting up in the world.

BABY'S BATH

I

MRS. BLACKSHAW had a baby. It would be an exaggeration to say that the baby interested the entire town, Bursley being an ancient, *blasé* sort of borough of some thirty thousand inhabitants. Babies, in fact, arrived in Bursley at the rate of more than a thousand every year. Nevertheless, a few weeks after the advent of Mrs. Blackshaw's baby, when the medical officer of health reported to the Town Council that the births for the month amounted to ninety-five, and that the birth-rate of Bursley compared favourably with the birth-rates of the sister towns, Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, and Turnhill — when the medical officer read these memorable words at the monthly meeting of the Council, and the *Staffordshire Signal* reported them, and Mrs. Blackshaw perused them, a blush of pride spread over Mrs. Blackshaw's face, and she picked up the baby's left foot and gave it a little peck of a kiss. She could not help feeling that the real solid foundation of that formidable and magnificent output of babies was her baby. She could not help feeling that she had done something for the town — had caught the public eye.

As for the baby, except that it was decidedly superior to the average infant in external appearance and pleasantness of disposition, it was, in all essential characteristics, a typical baby — that is to say, it was purely sensuous and it lived the life of the senses. It was utterly selfish. It never thought of any one but itself. It honestly imagined itself to be the centre of the created universe. It was convinced that the rest of the universe had been brought into existence solely for the convenience and pleasure of it — the baby. When it wanted anything, it made no secret of the fact, and it was always utterly unscrupulous in trying to get what it wanted. If it could have obtained the moon, it would have upset all the astronomers of Europe and made *Whitaker's Almanack* unsalable without a pang. It had no god but its stomach. It never bothered its head about higher things. It was a bully and a coward, and it treated women as beings of a lower order than men. In a word, it was that ideal creature, sung of the poets, from which we gradually sink and fall away as we grow older.

At the age of six months it had quite a lot of hair, and a charming rosy expanse at the back of its neck, caused through lying on its back in contemplation of its own importance. It didn't know the date of the Battle of Hastings, but it knew with the certainty of absolute knowledge that it was the master of the house, and that the activity of the house revolved round it.

Now, the baby loved its bath. In any case its bath

would have been an affair of immense and intricate pomp; but the fact that it loved its bath raised the interest and significance of the bath to the *n*th power. The bath took place at five o'clock in the evening, and it is not too much to say that the idea of the bath was immanent in the very atmosphere of the house. When you have an appointment with the dentist at five o'clock in the afternoon, the idea of the appointment is immanent in your mind from the first moment of your awakening. Conceive that an appointment with the dentist implies heavenly joy instead of infernal pain, and you will have a notion of the daily state of Mrs. Blackshaw and Emmie (the nurse) with regard to the baby's bath.

Even at ten in the morning Emmie would be keeping an eye on the kitchen fire, lest the cook might let it out. And shortly after noon Mrs. Blackshaw would be keeping an eye on the thermometer in the bedroom where the bath occurred. From four o'clock onwards the clocks in the house were spied on and overlooked like suspected persons; but they were used to that, because the baby had his sterilised milk every two hours. I have at length allowed you to penetrate the secret of his sex.

And so at five o'clock precisely the august and exciting ceremony began in the best bedroom. A bright fire was burning (the month being December), and the carefully-shaded electric lights were also burning. A large bath-towel was spread in a convenient place on the floor, and on the towel were two chairs facing each other, and a table. On one chair

was the bath, and on the other was Mrs. Blackshaw with her sleeves rolled up, and on Mrs. Blackshaw was another towel, and on that towel was Roger (the baby). On the table were zinc ointment, vaseline, scentless eau de Cologne, Castile soap, and a powder-puff.

Emmie having pretty nearly filled the bath with a combination of hot and cold waters, dropped the floating thermometer into it, and then added more waters until the thermometer indicated the precise temperature proper for a baby's bath. But you are not to imagine that Mrs. Blackshaw trusted a mere thermometer. No. She put her arm in the water up to the elbow. She reckoned the sensitive skin near the elbow was worth forty thermometers.

Emmie was chiefly an audience. Mrs. Blackshaw had engaged her as nurse, but she could have taught a nigger-boy to do all that she allowed the nurse to do. During the bath Mrs. Blackshaw and Emmie hated and scorned each other, despite their joy. Emmie was twice Mrs. Blackshaw's age, besides being twice her weight, and she knew twice as much about babies as Mrs. Blackshaw did. However, Mrs. Blackshaw had the terrific advantage of being the mother of that particular infant, and she could always end an argument when she chose, and in her own favour. It was unjust, and Emmie felt it to be unjust; but this is not a world of justice.

Roger, though not at all precocious, was perfectly aware of the carefully-concealed hostility between his mother and his nurse, and often, with his usual

unscrupulousness, he used it for his own ends. He was sitting upon his mother's knees toying with the edge of the bath, already tasting its delights in advance. Mrs. Blackshaw undressed the upper half of him, and then she laid him on the flat of his back and undressed the lower half of him, but keeping some wisp of a garment round his equatorial regions. And then she washed his face with a sponge and the Castile soap, very gently, but not half gently enough for Emmie, nor half gently enough for Roger, for Roger looked upon this part of the business as insulting and superfluous. He breathed hard and kicked his feet nearly off.

"Yes, it's dreadful having our face washed, isn't it?" said Mrs. Blackshaw, with her sleeves up, and her hair by this time down. "We don't like it, do we? Yes, yes."

Emmie grunted, without a sound, and yet Mrs. Blackshaw heard her, and finished that face quickly and turned to the hands.

"Potato-gardens every day," she said. "Evzy day-day. Enough of that, Colonel!" (For, after all, she had plenty of spirit.) "Fat little creases! Fat little creases! There! He likes that! There! Feet! Feet! Feet and legs! Then our back! And then *whup* we shall go into the bath! That's it. Kick! Kick your mother!"

And she turned him over.

"Incredible bungler!" said the eyes of the nurse. "Can't she turn him over neater than that!"

"Harridan!" said the eyes of Mrs. Blackshaw.

"I wouldn't let you bath him for twenty thousand pounds!"

Roger continued to breathe hard, as if his mother were a horse and he were rubbing her down.

"Now! Zoop! Whup!" cried his mother, and having deprived him of his final rag, she picked him up and sat him in the bath, and he was divinely happy, and so were the women. He appeared a gross little animal in the bath, all the tints of his flesh shimmering under the electric light. His chest was superb, but the rolled and creased bigness of his inordinate stomach was simply appalling, not to mention his great thighs and calves. The truth was, he had grown so that if he had been only a little bit bigger, he would have burst the bath. He resembled an old man who had been steadily eating too much for about forty years.

His two womenfolk now candidly and openly worshipped him, forgetting sectarian differences.

And he splashed. Oh! he splashed. You see, he had learnt how to splash, and he had certainly got an inkling that to splash was wicked and messy. So he splashed — in his mother's face, in Emmie's face, in the fire. He pretty well splashed the fire out. Ten minutes before, the bedroom had been tidy, a thing of beauty. It was now naught but a wild welter of towels, socks, binders — peninsulas of clothes nearly surrounded by water.

Finally his mother seized him again, and, rearing his little legs up out of the water, immersed the whole of his inflated torso beneath the surface.

"Hallo!" she exclaimed. "Did the water run over his mouf? Did it?"

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us! How clumsy she is!" commented the eyes of Emmie.

"There! I fink that's about long enough for this kind of wevver," said the mother.

"I should think it was! There's almost a crust of ice on the water now!" the nurse refrained from saying.

And Roger, full of regrets, was wrenched out of the bath. He had ceased breathing hard while in the water, but he began again immediately he emerged.

"We don't like our face wiped, do we?" said his mother on his behalf. "We want to go back into that bath. We like it. It's more fun than anything that happens all day long! Eh! That old dandruff's coming up in fine style. It's a-peeling off like anything."

And all the while she wiped him, patted eau de Cologne into him with the flat of her hand, and rubbed zinc ointment into him, and massaged him, and powdered him, and turned him over and over and over, till he was thoroughly well basted and cooked. And he kept on breathing hard.

Then he sneezed, amid general horror!

"I told you so!" the nurse didn't say, and she rushed to the bed where all the idol's beautiful, clean, aired things were lying safe from splashings, and handed a flannel shirt, about two inches in length, to Mrs. Blackshaw. And Mrs. Blackshaw rolled

the left sleeve of it into a wad and stuck it over his arm, and his poor little vaccination marks were hidden from view till next morning. Roger protested.

"We don't like clothes, do we?" said his mother. "We want to tumble back into our tub. We aren't much for clothes anyway. We'se a little Hottentot, aren't we?"

And she gradually covered him with one garment or another until there was nothing left of him but his head and his hands and feet. And she sat him up on her knees, so as to fasten his things behind. And then it might have been observed that he was no longer breathing hard, but giving vent to a sound between a laugh and a cry, while sucking his thumb and gazing round the room.

"That's our little affected cry that we start for our milk, isn't it?" his mother explained to him.

And he agreed that it was.

And before Emmie could fly across the room for the bottle, all ready and waiting, his mouth, in the shape of a perfect rectangle, had monopolised five-sixths of his face, and he was scarlet and bellowing with impatience.

He took the bottle like a tiger his prey, and seized his mother's hand that held the bottle, and he furiously pumped the milk into that insatiable gulf of a stomach. But he found time to gaze about the room too. A tear stood in each roving eye, caused by the effort of feeding.

"Yes, that's it," said his mother. "Now look

round and see what's happening, Curiosity! Well, if you *will* bob your head, I can't help it."

"Of course you can!" the nurse didn't say.

Then he put his finger into his mouth side by side with the bottle, and gagged himself, and choked, and gave a terrible — excuse the word — hiccough. After which he seemed to lose interest in the milk, and the pumping operations slackened and then ceased.

"Goosey!" whispered his mother, "getting seepy? Is the sandman throwing sand in our eyes? Old Sandman at it? Sh——" . . . He had gone.

Emmie took him. The women spoke in whispers. And Mrs. Blackshaw, after a day spent in being a mother, reconstituted herself a wife, and began to beautify herself for her husband.

II

Yes, there was a Mr. Blackshaw, and with Mr. Blackshaw the tragedy of the bath commences. Mr. Blackshaw was a very important young man. Indeed, it is within the mark to say that, next to his son, he was the most important young man in Bursley. For Mr. Blackshaw was the manager of the newly-opened Municipal Electricity Works. And the Municipal Electricity had created more excitement and interest than anything since the 1887 Jubilee, when an ox was roasted whole in the market-place and turned bad in the process. Had Bursley been a Swiss village, or a French country town, or a hamlet in Arizona, it would have had its electricity

fifteen years ago, but being only a progressive English borough, with an annual value of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, it struggled on with gas till well into the twentieth century. Its great neighbour Hanbridge had become acquainted with electricity in the nineteenth century.

All the principal streets and squares, and every decent shop that Hanbridge competition had left standing, and many private houses, now lighted themselves by electricity, and the result was splendid and glaring and coldly yellow. Mr. Blackshaw developed into the hero of the hour. People looked at him in the street as though he had been the discoverer and original maker of electricity. And if the manager of the gasworks had not already committed murder, it was because the manager of the gasworks had a right sense of what was due to his position as vicar's churchwarden at St. Peter's Church.

But greatness has its penalties. And the chief penalty of Mr. Blackshaw's greatness was that he could not see Roger have his nightly bath. It was impossible for Mr. Blackshaw to quit his arduous and responsible post before seven o'clock in the evening. Later on, when things were going more smoothly, he might be able to get away; but then, later on, his son's bath would not be so amusing and agreeable as it then, by all reports, was. The baby was, of course, bathed on Sunday nights, but Sunday afternoon and evening Mr. Blackshaw was obliged to spend with his invalid mother at Longshaw. It was on the sole condition of his weekly presence thus

in her house that she had consented not to live with the married pair. And so Mr. Blackshaw could not witness Roger's bath. He adored Roger. He understood Roger. He weighed, nursed, and fed Roger. He was "up" in all the newest theories of infant rearing. In short, Roger was his passion, and he knew everything of Roger except Roger's bath. And when his wife met him at the front door of a night at seven-thirty and launched instantly into a description of the wonders, delights, and excitations of Roger's latest bath, Mr. Blackshaw was ready to tear his hair with disappointment and frustration.

"I suppose you couldn't put it off for a couple of hours one night, May?" he suggested at supper on the evening of the particular bath described above.

"Sidney!" protested Mrs. Blackshaw, pained.

Mr. Blackshaw felt that he had gone too far, and there was a silence.

"Well!" said Mr. Blackshaw at length, "I have just made up my mind. I'm going to see that kid's bath, and, what's more, I'm going to see it to-morrow. I don't care what happens."

"But how shall you manage to get away, darling?"

"You will telephone me about a quarter of an hour before you're ready to begin, and I'll pretend it's something very urgent, and scoot off."

"Well, that will be lovely, darling!" said Mrs. Blackshaw. "I *would* like you to see him in the bath, just once! He looks so ——"

And so on.

The next day, Mr. Blackshaw, that fearsome autocrat of the Municipal Electricity Works, was saying to himself all day that at five o'clock he was going to assist at the spectacle of his wonderful son's bath. The prospect inspired him. So much so that every hand on the place was doing its utmost in fear and trembling, and the whole affair was running with the precision and smoothness of a watch.

From four o'clock onwards, Mr. Blackshaw, in the solemn, illuminated privacy of the managerial office, safe behind glass partitions, could no more contain his excitement. He hovered in front of the telephone, waiting for it to ring. Then, at a quarter to five, just when he felt he couldn't stand it any longer, and was about to ring up his wife instead of waiting for her to ring him up, he saw a burly shadow behind the glass door, and gave a desolate sigh. That shadow could only be thrown by one person, and that person was his Worship the Mayor of Bursley. His Worship entered the private office with mayoral assurance, pulling in his wake a stout old lady whom he introduced as his aunt from Wolverhampton. And he calmly proposed that Mr. Blackshaw should show the mayoral aunt over the new Electricity Works!

Mr. Blackshaw was sick of showing people over the Works. Moreover, he naturally despised the Mayor. All permanent officials of municipalities thoroughly despise their mayors (up their sleeves). A mayor is here to-day and gone to-morrow, whereas

a permanent official is permanent. A mayor knows nothing about anything except his chain and the rules of debate, and he is, further, a tedious and meddlesome person — in the opinion of permanent officials.

So Mr. Blackshaw's fury at the inept appearance of the Mayor and the mayoral aunt at this critical juncture may be imagined. The worst of it was, he didn't know how to refuse the Mayor.

Then the telephone-bell rang.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Blackshaw, with admirably simulated politeness, going to the instrument. "Are you there? Who is it?"

"It's me, darling," came the thin voice of his wife far away at Bleakridge. "The water's just getting hot. We're nearly ready. Can you come now?"

"By Jove! Wait a moment!" exclaimed Mr. Blackshaw, and then turning to his visitors, "Did you hear that?"

"No," said the Mayor.

"All those three new dynamos that they've got at the Hanbridge Electricity Works have just broken down. I knew they would. I told them they would!"

"Dear, dear!" said the Mayor of Bursley, secretly delighted by this disaster to a disdainful rival. "Why! They'll have the town in darkness. What are they going to do?"

"They want me to go over at once. But, of course, I can't. At least, I must give myself the pleasure of showing you and this lady over our Works, first."

"Nothing of the kind, Mr. Blackshaw!" said the Mayor. "Go at once. Go at once. If Bursley can be of any assistance to Hanbridge in such a crisis, I shall be only too pleased. We will come to-morrow, won't we, auntie?"

Mr. Blackshaw addressed the telephone.

"The Mayor is here, with a lady, and I was just about to show them over the Works, but his Worship insists that I come at once."

"Certainly," the Mayor put in pompously.

"Wonders will never cease," came the thin voice of Mrs. Blackshaw through the telephone. "It's very nice of the old thing! What's his lady friend like!"

"Not like anything. Unique!" replied Mr. Blackshaw.

"Young?" came the voice.

"Dates from the thirties," said Mr. Blackshaw. "I'm coming." And he rang off.

"I didn't know there was any electric machinery as old as that," said the mayoral aunt.

"We'll just look about us a bit," the Mayor remarked. "Don't lose a moment, Mr. Blackshaw."

And Mr. Blackshaw hurried off, wondering vaguely how he should explain the lie when it was found out, but not caring much. After all, he could easily ascribe the episode to the trick of some practical joker.

III

He arrived at his commodious and electrically lit residence in the very nick of time, and full to overflowing with innocent paternal glee. Was he not about to see Roger's tub? Roger was just ready to be carried up-stairs as Mr. Blackshaw's latchkey turned in the door.

"Wait a sec!" cried Mr. Blackshaw to his wife, who had the child in her arms, "I'll carry him up."

And he threw away his hat, stick, and overcoat and grabbed ecstatically at the infant. And he had got perhaps half-way up the stairs, when lo! the electric light went out. Every electric light in the house went out.

"Great Scott!" breathed Mr. Blackshaw, aghast.

He pulled aside the blind of the window at the turn of the stairs, and peered forth. The street was as black as your hat, or nearly so.

"Great Scott!" he repeated. "May, get candles."

Something had evidently gone wrong at the Works. Just his luck! He had quitted the Works for a quarter of an hour, and the current had failed!

Of course, the entire house was instantly in an uproar, turned upside down, startled out of its life. But a few candles soon calmed its transports. And at length Mr. Blackshaw gained the bedroom in safety, with the offspring of his desires comfortable in a shawl.

"Give him to me," said May shortly. "I sup-

pose you'll have to go back to the Works at once?"

Mr. Blackshaw paused, and then nerved himself; but while he was pausing, May, glancing at the two feeble candles, remarked: "It's very tiresome. I'm sure I shan't be able to see properly."

"No!" almost shouted Mr. Blackshaw. "I'll watch this kid have his bath or I'll die for it! I don't care if all the Five Towns are in darkness. I don't care if the Mayor's aunt has got caught in a dynamo and is suffering horrible tortures. I've come to see this bath business, and dashed if I don't see it!"

"Well, don't stand between the bath and the fire, dearest," said May coldly.

Meanwhile, Emmie, having pretty nearly filled the bath with a combination of hot and cold waters, dropped the floating thermometer into it, and then added more waters until the thermometer indicated the precise temperature proper for a baby's bath. But you are not to imagine that Mrs. Blackshaw trusted a mere thermometer ——

She did not, however, thrust her bared arm into the water this time. No! Roger, who never cried before his bath, was crying, was indubitably crying. And he cried louder and louder.

"Stand where he can't see you, dearest. He isn't used to you at bath-time," said Mrs. Blackshaw still coldly. "Are you, my pet? There! There!"

Mr. Blackshaw effaced himself, feeling a fool. But Roger continued to cry. He cried himself pur-

ple. He cried till the veins stood out on his forehead and his mouth was like a map of Australia. He cried himself into a monster of ugliness. Neither mother nor nurse could do anything with him at all.

"I think you've upset him, dearest," said Mrs. Blackshaw even more coldly. "Hadn't you better go?"

"Well——" protested the father.

"I think you had better go," said Mrs. Blackshaw, adding no term of endearment, and visibly controlling herself with difficulty.

And Mr. Blackshaw went. He had to go. He went out into the unelectric night. He headed for the Works, not because he cared twopence, at that moment, about the accident at the Works, whatever it was; but simply because the Works was the only place to go to. And even outside in the dark street he could hear the rousing accents of his progeny.

People were talking to each other as they groped about in the road, and either making jokes at the expense of the new Electricity Department, or frankly cursing it with true Five Towns directness of speech. And as Mr. Blackshaw went down the hill into the town his heart was as black as the street itself with rage and disappointment. He had made his child cry!

Someone stopped him.

"Eh, Mester Blackshaw!" said a voice, and under the voice a hand struck a match to light a pipe. "What's th' maning o' this eclipse as you'm treating uz to?"

Mr. Blackshaw looked right through the inquirer — a way he had when his brain was working hard. And he suddenly smiled by light of the match.

"*That child wasn't crying because I was there,*" said Mr. Blackshaw with solemn relief. "*Not at all! He was crying because he didn't understand the candles. He isn't used to candles, and they frightened him.*"

And he began to hurry towards the Works.

At the same instant the electric light returned to Bursley. The current was resumed.

"That's better," said Mr. Blackshaw, sighing.

JOCK-AT-A-VENTURE

I

ALL this happened at a Martinmas Fair in Bursley, long ago in the fifties, when everybody throughout the Five Towns pronounced Bursley "Bosley" as a matter of course; in the tedious and tragic old times, before it had been discovered that hell was a myth, and before the invention of pleasure or even of half-holidays. Martinmas was in those days a very important moment in the annual life of the town, for it was at Martinmas that potters' wages were fixed for twelvemonths ahead, and potters hired themselves out for that term at the best rate they could get. To the present day the housewives reckon chronology by Martinmas. They say: "It'll be seven years come Martinmas that Sal's babby died o' convulsions." Or: "It was that year as it rained and hailed all Martinmas." And many of them have no idea why it is Martinmas, and not midsummer or Whitsun, that is always on the tips of their tongues.

The Fair was one of the two great drunken sprees of the year, the other being the Wakes. And it was meet that it should be so, for intoxication was a powerful aid to the signing of contracts. A sot

would put his name to anything, gloriously; and when he had signed he had signed. Thus the beaver-hatted employers smiled at Martinmas drunkenness, and smacked it familiarly on the back; and little boys swilled themselves into the gutter with their elders, and felt intensely proud of the feat. These heroic old times have gone by, never to return.

It was on the Friday before Martinmas, at dusk. In the centre of the town, on the waste ground to the north of the "Shambles" (as the stone-built meat market was called), and in the space between the Shambles and the as yet unfinished new Town Hall, the showmen and the showgirls and the showboys were titivating their booths, and cooking their teas, and watering their horses, and polishing the brass-rails of their vans, and brushing their fancy costumes, and hammering fresh tent-pegs into the hard ground, and lighting the first flares of the evening, and yarning, and quarrelling, and washing,— all under the sombre purple sky, for the diversion of a small crowd of loafers, big and little, who stood obstinately with their hands in their pockets or in their sleeves, missing naught of the promising spectacle.

Now in the midst of what in less than twenty-four hours would be the Fair was to be seen a strange and piquant sight,— namely, a group of three white-tied, broad-brimmed Dissenting ministers, in earnest converse with fat Mr. Snaggs, the proprietor of Snaggs's — Snaggs's being the town theatre, a wooden erection, generally called by patrons the "Blood-Tub,"

on account of its sanguinary programmes. On this occasion Mr. Snaggs and the Dissenting ministers were for once in a way agreed. They all objected to a certain feature of the Fair. It was not the roundabouts, so crude that even an infant of to-day would despise them. It was not the shooting galleries, nor the cocoanut-shies. It was not the arrangements of the beersellers, which were formidably Bacchic. It was not the boxing booths, where adventurous youths could have teeth knocked out and eyes smashed in free of charge. It was not the monstrosity booths, where misshapen and maimed creatures of both sexes were displayed all alive and nearly nude to anybody with a penny to spare. What Mr. Snaggs and the ministers of religion objected to was the theatre-booths, in which the mirror, more or less cracked and tarnished, was held up to nature.

Mr. Snaggs's objection was professional. He considered that he alone was authorised to purvey drama to the town; he considered that among all purveyors of drama he alone was respectable, the rest being upstarts, poachers, and lewd fellows. And as the Dissenting ministers gazed at Mr. Snaggs's superb moleskin waistcoat, and listened to his positive brazen voice, they were almost convinced that the hated institution of the theatre could be made respectable and that Mr. Snaggs had so made it. At any rate, by comparison with these flashy and flimsy booths, the Blood Tub, rooted in the antiquity of thirty years, had a dignified, even a reputable air,

— and did not Mr. Snaggs give frequent performances of Cruickshanks' "The Bottle," a sermon against intemperance more impressive than any sermon delivered from a pulpit in a chapel? The Dissenting ministers listened with deference as Mr. Snaggs explained to them exactly what they ought to have done, and what they had failed to do, in order to ensure the success of their campaign against play-acting in the Fair; a campaign which now for several years past had been abortive,— largely (it was rumoured) owing to the secret jealousy of the Church of England.

"If ony on ye had had any gumption," Mr. Snaggs was saying fearlessly to the parsons, "ye'd ha' gone straight to th' Chief Bailiff and ye'd ha'—— Houch!" He made the peculiar exclamatory noise roughly indicated by the last word, and spat in disgust; and without the slightest ceremony of adieu walked ponderously away up the slope, leaving his sentence unfinished.

"It is remarkable how Mr. Snaggs flees from before my face," said a neat, alert, pleasant voice from behind the three parsons. "And yet save that in my unregenerate day I once knocked him off a stool in front of his own theayter, I never did him harm nor wished him anything but good. . . . Gentlemen!"

A rather small, slight man of about forty, with tiny feet and hands, and "very quick on his pins," saluted the three parsons gravely.

"Mr. Smith!" one parson stiffly inclined.

"Mr. Smith!" from the second.

"Brother Smith!" from the third, who was Jock Smith's own parson, being in charge of the Bethesda in Trafalgar Road, where Jock Smith worshipped and where he had recently begun to preach as a local preacher.

Jock Smith, herbalist, shook hands with vivacity but also with self-consciousness. He was self-conscious because he knew himself to be one of the chief characters and attractions of the town, because he was well aware that wherever he went people stared at him, and pointed him out to each other. And he was half-proud and half-ashamed of his notoriety.

Even now a little band of ragged children had wandered after him, and, undeterred by the presence of the parsons, were repeating among themselves, in a low, audacious monotone:

"Jock-at-a-Venture! Jock-at-a-Venture!"

II

He was the youngest of fourteen children, and when he was a month old his mother took him to church to be christened. The rector was the celebrated Rappey, sportsman, who (it is said) once pawned the church Bible in order to get up a bear-baiting. Rappey asked the name of the child, and was told by the mother that she had come to the end of her knowledge of names, and would be obliged for a suggestion. Whereupon Rappey began to cite all the most ludicrous names in the Bible, such as

Aholibamah, Kenaz, Iram, Baal-hanan, Abiasaph, Amram, Mushi, Libni, Nepheg, Abihu. And the mother laughed, shaking her head. And Rappey went on: Shimi, Carmi, Jochebed. And at Jochebed the mother had become hysterical with laughter. "Jock-at-a-Venture," she had sniggered, and Rappey, mischievously taking her at her word, christened the infant Jock-at-a-Venture before she could protest; and the infant was stamped forever as peculiar.

He lived up to his name. He ran away twice, and after having been both a sailor and a soldier, he returned home with the accomplishment of flourishing a razor, and settled in Bursley as a barber. Immediately he became the most notorious barber in the Five Towns, on account of his gab and his fisticuffs. It was he who shaved the left side of the face of an insulting lieutenant of dragoons (after the great riots of '45, which two thousand military had not quelled), and then pitched him out of the shop soapsuds and all, and fought him to a finish in the Cock Yard and flung him through the archway into the market-place with just half a magnificent beard and moustache. It was he who introduced hair-dyeing into Bursley. Hair-dyeing might have grown popular in the town if one night, owing to some confusion with red ink, the Chairman of the Bursley Burial Board had not emerged from Jock-at-a-Venture's with a vermilion topknot and been greeted on the pavement by his waiting wife with the bitter words: "Thou fool!"

A little later Jock-at-a-Venture abandoned barbering, and took up music, for which he had always

shown a mighty gift. He was really musical, and performed on both the piano and the cornet, not merely with his hands and mouth, but with the whole of his agile, expressive body. He made a good living out of public-houses and tea-meetings, for none could play the piano like Jock, were it hymns or were it jigs. His cornet was employed in a band at Moorthorne, the mining village to the east of Bursley, and on his nocturnal journeys to and from Moorthorne with the beloved instrument he had had many a set-to with the marauding colliers who made the road dangerous for cowards. One result of his connection with Moorthorne was that a boxing-club had been formed in Bursley, with Jock as chief, for the upholding of Bursley's honour against visiting Moorthorne colliers in Bursley's market-place.

Then came Jock's conversion to religion, a blazing affair, and his abandonment of public-houses. As tea-meetings alone would not keep him, he had started again in life, for the fifth or sixth time,— as a herbalist now. It was a vocation which suited his delicate hands and his enthusiasm for humanity. At last, and quite lately, he had risen to be a local preacher. His first two sermons had impassioned the congregations, though there were critics to accuse him of theatricality. Accidents happened to him sometimes. On this very afternoon of the Friday before Martinmas an accident had happened to him. He had been playing the piano at the rehearsal of the Grand Annual Evening Concert of the Bursley Male Glee-Singers. The Bursley Male Glee-Sing-

ers, determined to beat records, had got a soprano with a foreign name down from Manchester. On seeing the shabby, perky little man who was to accompany her songs the soprano had had a moment of terrible misgiving. But as soon as Jock, with a careful-careless glance at the music which he had never seen before, had played the first chords (with a "How's that for time, missis?"), she was reassured. At the end of the song her enthusiasm for the musical gifts of the local artist was such that she had sprung from the platform and simply but cordially kissed him. She was a stout feverish lady. He liked a lady to be stout; and the kiss was pleasant, and the compliment enormous. But what a calamity for a local preacher with a naughty past to be kissed in full rehearsal by a soprano from Manchester! He knew that he had to live that kiss down, and to live down also the charge of theatricality.

Here was a reason, and a very good one, why he deliberately sought the company of parsons in the middle of the Fair-ground. He had to protect himself against tongues.

III

"I don't know," said Jock-at-a-Venture to the parsons, gesturing with his hands, and twisting his small elegant feet, "I don't know as I'm in favour of stopping these play-acting folk from making a living — stopping 'em by force, that is."

He knew that he had said something shocking,

something that when he joined the group he had not in the least meant to say. He knew that instead of protecting himself he was exposing himself to danger. But he did not care. When, as now, he was carried away by an idea, he cared for naught. And moreover he had the consciousness of being cleverer, acuter, than any of these ministers of religion, than anybody in the town! His sheer skill and resourcefulness in life had always borne him safely through every difficulty — from a prizefight to a soprano's embrace.

"A strange doctrine, Brother Smith!" said Jock's own pastor.

The other two hummed and hawed, and brought the tips of their fingers together.

"Nay!" said Jock, persuasively smiling. "'Stead o' bringing 'em to starvation, bring 'em to the house o' God! Preach the gospel to 'em, and then when ye've preached the gospel to 'em, happen they'll change their ways o' their own accord. Or happen they'll put their play-acting to the service o' God. If there's plays agen drink, why shouldna' there be plays agen the devil, and *for* Jesus Christ, our blessed Redeemer?"

"Good day to you, brethren," said one of the parsons, and departed. Thus only could he express his horror of Jock's sentiments.

In those days churches and chapels were not so empty that parsons had to go forth beating up congregations. A pew was a privilege. And those who did not frequent the means of grace had at any rate

the grace to be ashamed of not doing so. And further, strolling players, in spite of John Wesley's exhortations, were not considered to be salvable. The notion of trying to rescue them from merited perdition was too fantastic to be seriously entertained by serious Christians. Finally, the suggested connection between Jesus Christ and a stage-play was really too appalling! None but Jock-at-a-Venture would have been capable of such an idea.

"I think, my friend ——" began the second remaining minister.

"Look at that good woman there!" cried Jock-at-a-Venture, interrupting him with a dramatic outstretching of the right arm, as he pointed to a very stout but comely dame who, seated on a three-legged stool, was calmly peeling potatoes in front of one of the more resplendent booths. "Look at that face! Is there no virtue in it? Is there no hope for salvation in it?"

"None," Jock's pastor replied mournfully. "That woman — her name is Clowes — is notorious. She has eight children, and she has brought them all up to her trade. I have made enquiries. The elder daughters are actresses and married to play-actors, and even the youngest child is taught to strut on the boards. Her troupe is the largest in the Midlands."

Jock-at-a-Venture was certainly dashed by this information.

"The more reason," said he obstinately, "for saving her! . . . And all hers!"

The two ministers did not want her to be saved.

They liked to think of the theatre as being beyond the pale. They remembered the time, before they were ordained, and after, when they had hotly desired to see the inside of a theatre and to rub shoulders with wickedness. And they took pleasure in the knowledge that the theatre was always there, and the wickedness thereof, and the lost souls therein. But Jock-at-a-Venture genuinely longed, in that ecstasy of his, for the total abolition of all forms of sin.

"And what would you do to save her, brother?" Jock's pastor enquired coldly.

"What would I do? I'd go and ask her to come to chapel Sunday, her and hers. I'd axe her kindly, and I'd crack a joke with her. And I'd get round her for the Lord's sake."

Both ministers sighed. The same thought was in their hearts: namely, that brands plucked from the burning (such as Jock) had a disagreeable tendency to carry piety, as they had carried sin, to the most ridiculous and inconvenient lengths.

IV

"Those are bonny potatoes, missis!"

"Ay!" The stout woman, the upper part of whose shabby dress seemed to be subjected to considerable strains, looked at Jock carelessly, and then, attracted perhaps by his eager face, smiled with a certain facile amiability.

"But by th' time they're cooked your supper'll be late, I'm reckoning."

"Them potatoes have naught to do with our supper," said Mrs. Clowes. "They're for to-morrow's dinner. There'll be no time for peeling potatoes to-morrow. Kezia!" She shrilled the name.

A slim little girl showed herself between the heavy curtains of the main tent of Mrs. Clowes' caravanserai.

"Bring Sapphira, too!"

"Those yours?" asked Jock.

"They're mine," said Mrs. Clowes. "And I've six more, not counting grandchildren and sons-in-law like."

"No wonder you want a pailful of potatoes!" said Jock.

Kezia and Sapphira appeared in the gloom. They might have counted sixteen years together. They were dirty, tousled, graceful and lovely.

"Twins," Jock suggested.

Mrs. Clowes nodded. "Off with this pail, now! And mind you don't spill the water. Here Kezia! Take the knife. And bring me the other pail."

The children bore away the heavy pail, staggering, eagerly obedient. Mrs. Clowes lifted her mighty form from the stool, shook peelings from the secret places of her endless apron, and calmly sat down again.

"Ye rule 'em with a rod of iron, missis," said Jock.

She smiled good-humouredly, and shrugged her vast shoulders — no mean physical feat.

"I keep 'em lively," she said. "There's twelve of 'em in my lot, without th' two babbies. Someone's got to be after 'em all the time."

"And you not thirty-five, I swear!"

"Nay! Ye're wrong."

Sapphira brought her other pail, swinging it. She put it down with a clatter of the falling handle, and scurried off.

"Am I now?" Jock murmured, interested; and, as it were, out of sheer absent-mindedness, he turned the pail wrong side up, and seated hmself on it with a calm that equalled the calm of Mrs. Clowes.

It was now nearly dark. The flares of the showmen were answering each other across the fairground; and presently a young man came and hung one out above the railed platform of Mrs. Clowes' booth; and Mrs. Clowes blinked. From behind the booth floated the sounds of the confused chatter of men, girls, and youngsters, together with the complaint of an infant. A few yards away from Mrs. Clowes was a truss of hay; a pony sidled from somewhere with false innocence up to this truss, nosed it cautiously, and then began to bite wisps from it. Occasionally a loud but mysterious cry swept across the ground. The sky was full of mystery. Against the sky to the west stood black and clear the silhouette of the new Town Hall spire, a wondrous erection; and sticking out from it at one side was the form of a gigantic angel. It was the gold angel which from the summit of the spire has now watched over Bursley for half a century, but which on that

particular Friday had been lifted only two thirds of the way to its final home.

Jock-at-a-Venture felt deeply all the influences of the scene and of the woman. He was one of your romantic creatures; and for him the woman was magnificent. Her magnificence thrilled.

"And what are you going to say?" she quizzed him. "Sitting on my pail!"

Now to quiz Jock was to challenge him.

"Sitting on your pail, missis," he replied, "I'm going for to say that you're much too handsome a woman to go down to hell in eternal damnation."

She was taken aback, but her profession had taught her the art of quick recovery.

"You belong to that Methody lot," she mildly sneered. "I thought I seed you talking to them white-chokers."

"I do," said Jock.

"And I make no doubt you think yourself very clever."

"Well," he vouchsafed, "I can splice rope, shave a head, cure a wart or a boil, and tell a fine woman with any man in this town. Not to mention boxing, as I've given up on account of my religion."

"I *was* handsome once," said Mrs. Clowes, with apparent, but not real, inconsequence. "But I'm all run to fat, like. I've played Portia in my time. But now it's as much as I can do to get through with Maria Martin or Belladonna."

"Fat!" Jock protested. "Fat! I wouldn't have a ounce taken off ye for fifty guineas."

He was so enthusiastic that Mrs. Clowes blushed.

"What's this about hell-fire?" she questioned. "I often think of it — I'm a lonely woman, and I often think of it."

"You lonely!" Jock protested again. "With all them children?"

"Ay!"

There was a silence.

"See thee here, missis!" he exploded, jumping up from the pail. "Ye must come to th' Bethesda down yon, on Sunday morning, and hear the word o' God. It'll be the making on ye."

Mrs. Clowes shook her head.

"Nay!"

"And bring ye children," he persisted.

"If it was you as was going to preach like!" she said, looking away.

"It is me as is going to preach," he answered loudly and proudly. "And I'll preach agen any man in this town for a dollar!"

Jock was forgetting himself: an accident which often happened to him.

V

The Bethesda was crowded on Sunday morning; partly because it was Martinmas Sunday, and partly because the preacher happened to be Jock-at-a-Venture. That Jock should have been appointed, on the "plan" [rota of preachers] to discourse in the principal chapel of the Connexion at such an important feast showed what extraordinary progress he had

already made in the appreciation of that small public of experts which aided the parson in drawing up the quarterly plan. At the hands of the larger public his reception was sure. Some sixteen hundred of the larger public had crammed themselves into the chapel, and there was not an empty place either on the ground floor or in the galleries. Even the "orchestra" (as the "singing seat" was then called) had visitors in addition to the choir and the double-bass players. And not a window was open. At that date it had not occurred to people that fresh air was not a menace to existence. The whole congregation was sweltering, and rather enjoying it; for in some strangely subtle manner perspiration seemed to be a help to religious emotion. Scores of women were fanning themselves; and among these was a very stout peony-faced woman of about forty in a gorgeous yellow dress and a red-and-black bonnet, with a large boy and a small girl under one arm, and a large boy and a small girl under the other arm. The splendour of the group appeared somewhat at odds with the penury of the "Free Seats" whither it had been conducted by a steward.

In the pulpit, dominating all, was Jock-at-a-Venture, who sweated like the rest. He presented a rather noble aspect in his broadcloth, so different from his careless shabby weekday attire. His eye was lighted; his arm raised in a compelling gesture. Pausing effectively, he lifted a glass with his left hand and sipped. It was the signal that he had arrived at his peroration. His perorations were famous.

And this morning everybody felt, and he himself knew, that all previous perorations were to be surpassed. His subject was the wrath to come, and the transient quality of human life on earth. "Yea," he announced, in gradually increasing thunder, "all shall go. And loike the baseless fabric o' a vision, the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself — yea, I say, all which it inherits shall dissolve, and, like this unsubstantial payjent faded, leave not a rack behind."

His voice had fallen for the last words. After a dramatic silence, he finished, in a whisper almost, with eyebrows raised and staring gaze directed straight at the vast woman in yellow: "We are such stuff as drames are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep. May God have mercy on us. Hymn 442."

The effect was terrific. Men sighed and women wept, in relief that the strain was past. Jock was an orator; he wielded the orator's dominion. Well he knew, and well they all knew, that not a professional preacher in the Five Towns could play on a congregation as he did. For when Jock was roused you could nigh see the waves of emotion sweeping across the upturned faces of his hearers like waves across a wheat-field on a windy day.

And this morning he had been roused.

VI

But in the vestry after the service he met enemies, in the shape and flesh of the chapel steward and the

circuit-steward, Mr. Brett and Mr. Hanks respectively. Both these important officials were local preachers, but unfortunately their godliness did not protect them against the ravages of jealousy. Neither of them could stir a congregation nor even fill a country chapel.

"Brother Smith," said Jabez Hanks, shutting the door of the vestry. He was a tall man with a long greyish beard and no moustache. "Brother Smith, it is borne in upon me and my brother here to ask ye a question."

"Ask!" said Jock.

"Were them yer own words — about cloud-capped towers and baseless fabrics and the like? I ask ye civilly."

"And I answer ye civilly, they were," replied Jock.

"Because I have here," said Jabez Hanks, maliciously, "Dod's 'Beauties o' Shakespeare,' where I find them very same words, taken from a stage-play called 'The Tempest.'"

Jock went a little pale as Jabez Hanks opened the book.

"They may be Shakespeare's words, too," said Jock lightly.

"A fortnight ago, at Moorthorne Chapel, I suspected it," said Jabez.

"Suspected what?"

"Suspected ye o' quoting Shakespeare in our pulpits."

"And cannot a man quote in a sermon? Why,

Jabez Hanks, I've heard ye quote Matthew Henry by the fathom."

"Ye've never heard me quote a stage-play in a pulpit, Brother Smith," said Jabez Hanks majestically. "And as long as I'm chapel steward it wunna be tolerated in this chapel."

"Wunner it?" Jock put in defiantly.

"It's a defiling of the Lord's temple; that's what it is!" Jabez Hanks continued. "Ye make out as ye're against stage-plays at the Fair, and yet ye come here and mouth 'em in a Christian pulpit. *You* agen stage-plays! Weren't yer seen talking by the hour to one o' them trulls, Friday night? And weren't ye seen peeping through th' canvas last night? And was ——"

"Now what?" Jock enquired, approaching Jabez on his springy toes, and looking up at Jabez' great height.

Jabez took breath. "Now ye bring yer fancy women into the house o' God! You — a servant o' Christ, *you* ——"

Jock-at-a-Venture interrupted the sentence with his darting fist, which seemed to lift Jabez from the ground by his chin, and then to let him fall in a heap, as though his clothes had been a sack containing loose bones.

"A good-day to ye, Brother Brett," said Jock, reaching for his hat, and departing with a slam of the vestry-door.

He emerged at the back of the chapel, and got by "back-entries" into Aboukir Street, up which he

strolled with a fine show of tranquillity as far as the corner of Trafalgar Road, where stood and stands the great Dragon Hotel. The congregations of several chapels were dispersing slowly round about this famous corner, and Jock had to salute several of his own audience. Then suddenly he saw Mrs. Clowes and her four youngest children enter the tap-room door of the Dragon.

He hesitated one second, and followed the variegated flotilla and its convoy.

The tap-room was fairly full of both sexes. But among them Jock and Mrs. Clowes and her children were the only persons who had been to church or chapel.

"Here's preacher, Mother!" Kezia whispered, blushing, to Mrs. Clowes.

"Eh," said Mrs. Clowes, turning very amiably. "It's never you, mester! It was that hot in that chapel we're all on us dying of thirst. . . . Four gills and a pint, please!" (This to the tapster.)

"And give me a pint," said Jock desperately.

They all sat down familiarly. That a mother should take her children into a public-house, and give them beer, and on a Sunday of all days, and immediately after a sermon! That a local preacher should go direct from the vestry to the gin-place and there drink ale with a strolling-player! These phenomena were simply and totally inconceivable! And yet Jock was in presence of them, assisting at them, positively acting in them! And in spite of her enormities, Mrs. Clowes still struck him as a most agreeable,

decent, kindly, motherly woman,— quite apart from her handsomeness. And her offspring, each hidden to the eyes behind a mug, were a very well-behaved lot of children.

"It does us good," said Mrs. Clowes, quaffing. "And ye need sommat to keep ye up in these days! We did 'Belphegor,' and 'The Witch' and a harlequinade last night. And not one o' these childer got to bed before half after midnight. But I was determined to have 'em at chapel this morning. And not sorry I am I went! Eh, mester, what a Virginius you'd ha' made! I never heard preaching like it — not as I've heard much!"

"And you'll never hear anything like it again, Missis," said Jock. "For I've preached my last sermon."

"Nay, nay!" Mrs. Clowes deprecated.

"I've preached my last sermon," said Jock again. "And if I've saved a soul wi' it, missis . . . !" He looked at her steadily, and then drank.

"I won't say as you haven't," said Mrs. Clowes, lowering her eyes.

VII

Rather less than a week later, on a darkening night, a van left the town of Bursley by the Moorthorne Road on its way to Axe-in-the-Moors, which is the metropolis of the wild wastes that cut off northern Staffordshire from Derbyshire. This van was the last of Mrs. Clowes' caravanserai, and almost the last to leave the Fair. Owing to popular in-

terest in the events of Jock-at-a-Venture's public career, in whose meshes Mrs. Clowes had somehow got caught, the booth of Mrs. Clowes had succeeded beyond any other booth, and had kept open longer and burned more naphtha and taken far more money. The larger vans of the stout lady's enterprise (there were three in all) had gone forward in advance, with all her elder children and her children-in-law and her grandchildren, and the heavy wood and canvas of the booth. Mrs. Clowes, transacting her own business herself, from habit, invariably brought up the rear of her procession out of a town; and sometimes her leisurely manner of settling with the town authorities for water, ground-space, and other necessary commodities, left her several miles behind her tribe.

The mistress's van, though it would not compare with the glorious vehicles that showmen put upon the road in these days, was a roomy and dignified specimen, and about as good as money could then buy. The front portion consisted of a parlour and kitchen combined, and at the back was a dormitory. In the dormitory Kezia, Sapphira, and the youngest of their brothers, were sleeping hard. In the parlour and kitchen sat Mrs. Clowes, warmly enveloped, holding the reins with her right hand, and a shabby paper-covered book in her left hand. The book was the celebrated play "The Gamester," and Mrs. Clowes was studying therein the rôle of Dulcibel. Not a rôle for which Mrs. Clowes was physically fitted; but her prolific daughter, Hephzibah, to whom it appertained by prescription, could not possibly play

it any longer, and would indeed be incapacitated from any rôle whatever for at least a month! And the season was not yet over; for folk were hardier in those days.

The reins stretched out from the careless hand of Mrs. Clowes, and vanished through a slit between the double-doors, which had been fixed slightly open. Mrs. Clowes' gaze, penetrating now and then the slit, could see the gleam of her lamp's ray on a horse's flank. The only sounds were the hoof-falls of the horse, the crunching of the wheels on the wet road, the occasional rattle of a vessel in the racks when the van happened to descend violently into a rut, and the steady murmur of Mrs. Clowes' voice rehearsing the grandiloquence of the part of Dulcibel.

And then there was another sound, which Mrs. Clowes did not notice until it had been repeated several times; the cry of a human voice out on the road:

"Missis!"

She opened wide the doors of the van, and looked prudently forth. Naturally, inevitably, Jock-at-a-Venture was trudging alongside, level with the horse's tail! He stepped nimbly — he was a fine walker — but none the less his breath came short and quick, for he had been making haste up a steepish hill in order to overtake the van. And he carried a bundle and a stick in his hands, and on his head a superb but heavy beaver hat.

"I'm going your way, missis," said Jock.

"Seemingly," agreed Mrs. Clowes, with due caution.

"Canst gi' us a lift?" he asked.

"And welcome!" she said, her face changing like a flash to suit the words.

"Nay, ye needna' stop!" shouted Jock.

In an instant he had leapt easily up into the van, and was seated by her side therein on the children's stool.

"That's a hat — to travel in!" observed Mrs. Clowes.

Jock removed the hat, examined it lovingly, and replaced it.

"I couldn't ha' left it behind," said he, with a sigh, and continued rapidly in another voice: "Missis, we've seen a pretty good lot of each other this week, and yet ye slips off o' this'n, without saying good-bye, nor a word about yer soul!"

Mrs. Clowes heaved her enormous breast, and shook the reins.

"I've had my share of trouble," she remarked mysteriously.

"Tell me about it, missis!"

And lo! in a moment, lured on by his smile, she was telling him quite familiarly about the ailments of her younger children, the escapades of her unmarried daughter, aged fifteen, the surliness of one of her sons-in-law, the budding dishonesty of the other, the perils of infant life, and the need of repainting the big van and getting new pictures for the front of the booth. Indeed, all the worries of a queen of the road.

"And I'm so fat!" she said. "And yet I'm not

forty, and shan't be for two year — and me a grandmother!"

"I knowed it!" Jock exclaimed.

"If I wasn't such a heap o' flesh ——"

"Ye're the grandest heap o' flesh as I ever set eyes on, and I'm telling ye!" Jock interrupted her.

VIII

Then there were disconcerting sounds out in the world beyond the van. The horse stopped. The double-doors were forced open from without, and a black figure, with white eyes in a black face, filled the doorway. The van had passed through the mining village of Moorthorne, and this was one of the marauding colliers on the outskirts thereof. When the colliers had highroad business in the night they did not trouble to wash their faces after work. The coal-dust was a positive aid to them, for it gave them a most useful semblance to the devil.

Jock-at-a-Venture sprang up as though launched from a catapult.

"Is it thou, Jock?" cried the collier, astounded.

"Ay, lad!" said Jock briefly.

And caught the collier a blow under the chin that sent him flying into the obscurity of the night. Other voices sounded in the road. Jock rushed to the doorway, taking a pistol from his pocket. And Mrs. Clowes, all dithering like a jelly, heard shots. The horse started into a gallop. The reins escaped from the hands of the mistress, but Jock secured them, and

lashed the horse to greater speed with the loose ends of them.

"I've saved thee, missis!" he said, later. "I give him a regular lifter under the gob, same as I give Jabez, Sunday. But where's the sense of a lone woman wandering about dark roads of a night wi' a pack o' childer? . . . Them childer 'ud ha' slept through th' battle o' Trafalgar," he added.

Mrs. Clowes wept.

"Well may you say it!" she murmured. "And it's not the first time as I've been set on!"

"Thou'rt nowt but a girl, for all thy flesh, and thy grandchilder!" said Jock. "Dry thy eyes, or I'll dry 'em for thee!"

She smiled in her weeping. It was an invitation to him to carry out his threat.

And while he was drying her eyes for her, she asked:

"How far are ye going? Axe?"

"Ay! And beyond! Can I act, I ask ye? Can I fight, I ask ye? Can ye do without me, I ask ye, you a lone woman? And yer soul, as is mine to save?"

"But that business o' yours at Bursley?"

"Here's my bundle," he said. "And here's my best hat. I've money and a pistol in my pocket. The only thing I've clean forgot is my cornet; but I'll send for it and I'll play it at my wedding. I'm Jock-at-a-Venture."

And while the van was rumbling in the dark night across the waste and savage moorland, and while the

children were sleeping hard at the back of the van, and while the crockery was restlessly clinking in the racks and the lamps swaying, and while he held the reins, the thin, lithe, greying man contrived to take into his arms the vast and amiable creature whom he desired. And the van became a vehicle of high romance.

THE DEATH OF SIMON FUGE

I

IT was in the train that I learnt of his death. Although a very greedy eater of literature, I can only enjoy reading when I have little time for reading. Give me three hours of absolute leisure, with nothing to do but read, and I instantly become almost incapable of the act. So it is always on railway journeys, and so it was that evening. I was in the middle of Wordsworth's "Excursion"; I positively gloated over it, wondering why I should have allowed a mere rumour that it was dull to prevent me from consuming it earlier in my life. But do you suppose I could continue with Wordsworth in the train? I could not. I stared out of the windows; I calculated the speed of the train by my watch; I thought of my future and my past; I drew forth my hopes, examined them, polished them, and put them back again; I forgave myself my sins; and I dreamed of the exciting conquest of a beautiful and brilliant woman that I should one day achieve. In short, I did everything that men habitually do under such circumstances. The *Gazette* was lying folded on the seat beside me; one of the two London evening papers that a man of taste may peruse

without humiliating himself. How appetizing a morsel, this sheet new and smooth from the press, this sheet written by an ironic, understanding, small band of men for just a few thousand persons like me, ruthlessly scornful of the big circulations and the idols of the people! If the *Gazette* and its sole rival ceased to appear, I do believe that my existence and many similar existences would wear a different colour. Could one dine alone in Jermyn Street or Panton Street without this fine piquant evening commentary on the gross newspapers of the morning? (Now you perceive what sort of a man I am, and you guess, rightly, that my age is between thirty and forty.) But the train had stopped at Rugby and started again, and more than half of my journey was accomplished, ere at length I picked up the *Gazette,* and opened it with the false calm of a drunkard who has sworn that he will not wet his lips before a certain hour. For, well knowing from experience that I should suffer acute *ennui* on the train, I had, when buying the *Gazette* at Euston, taken oath that I would not even glance at it till after Rugby; it is always the final hour of these railway journeys that is the nethermost hell.

The second thing that I saw in the *Gazette* (the first was of course the "Entremets" column of wit, humour and parody, very uneven in its excellence), was the death of Simon Fuge. There was nearly a column about it, signed with initials, and the subheading of the article ran, "Sudden death of a great painter." That was characteristic of the *Gazette.*

That Simon Fuge was indeed a great painter is now admitted by most dilettants, though denied by a few. But to the great public he was not one of the great names. To the great public he was just a medium name. Ten to one that in speaking of him to a plain person you would feel compelled to add: "The painter, you know," and the plain person would respond: "Oh yes," falsely pretending that he was perfectly familiar with the name. Simon Fuge had many friends on the press, and it was solely owing to the loyalty of these friends in the matter of obituary notices that the great public heard more of Simon Fuge in the week after his death than it had heard of him during the thirty-five years of his life. It may be asked: Why, if he had so many and such loyal friends on the press, these friends did not take measures to establish his reputation before he died? The answer is that editors will not allow journalists to praise a living artist much in excess of the esteem in which the public holds him; they are timid. But when a misunderstood artist is dead the editors will put no limit on laudation. I am not on the press, but it happens that I know that world.

Of all the obituary notices of Simon Fuge, the *Gazette's* was the first. Somehow the *Gazette* had obtained exclusive news of the little event, and some one high up on the *Gazette's* staff had a very exalted notion indeed of Fuge, and must have known him personally. Fuge received his deserts as a painter in that column of print. He was compared to Sorolla y Bastida for vitality; the morbidezza of his flesh-

tints was stated to be unrivalled even by — I forget the name, painting is not my specialty. The writer blandly enquired why examples of Fuge's work were to be seen in the Luxembourg, at Vienna, at Florence, at Dresden; and not, for instance, at the Tate Gallery, or in the Chantrey collection. The writer also enquired, with equal blandness, why a painter who had been on the hanging committee of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts at Paris should not have been found worthy to be even an A.R.A. in London. In brief, old England "caught it," as occurred somewhere or other most nights in the columns of the *Gazette*. Fuge also received his deserts as a man. And the *Gazette* did not conceal that he had not been a man after the heart of the British public. He had been too romantically and intensely alive for that. The writer gave a little pen-portrait of him. It was very good, recalling his tricks of manner, his unforgettable eyes, and his amazing skill in talking about himself and really interesting everybody in himself. There was a special reference to one of Fuge's most dramatic recitals — a narration of a night spent in a boat on Ilam Lake with two beautiful girls, sisters, natives of the Five Towns, where Fuge was born. Said the obituarist: "Those two wonderful creatures who played so large a part in Simon Fuge's life."

This death was a shock to me. It took away my *ennui* for the rest of the journey. I too had known Simon Fuge. That is to say, I had met him once, at a *soirée* and on that single occasion, as luck had

it, he had favoured the company with the very narration to which the *Gazette* contributor referred. I remembered well the burning brilliance of his blue-black eyes, his touching assurance that all of us were necessarily interested in his adventures, and the extremely graphic and convincing way in which he reconstituted for us the nocturnal scene on Ilam Lake — the two sisters, the boat, the rustle of trees, the lights on shore, and his own difficulty in managing the oars, one of which he lost for half-an-hour and found again. It was by such details as that about the oar that, with a tint of humour, he added realism to the romantic quality of his tales. He seemed to have no reticences concerning himself. Decidedly he allowed things to be understood. . . . Yes, his was a romantic figure, the figure of one to whom every day, and every hour of the day, was coloured by the violence of his passion for existence. His pictures had often an unearthly beauty, but for him they were nothing but faithful renderings of what he saw.

My mind dwelt on those two beautiful sisters. Those two beautiful sisters appealed to me more than anything else in the *Gazette's* obituary. Surely — Simon Fuge had obviously been a man whose emotional susceptibility and virile impulsiveness must have opened the door for him to multifarious amours — but surely he had not made himself indispensable to both sisters simultaneously. Surely even he had not so far forgotten that Ilam Lake was in the middle of a country called England, and not the ornamental

water in the Bois de Boulogne! And yet. . . . The delicious possibility of ineffable indiscretions on the part of Simon Fuge monopolised my mind till the train stopped at Knype, and I descended. Nevertheless, I think I am a serious and fairly insular Englishman. It is truly astonishing how a serious person can be obsessed by trifles that, to speak mildly, do not merit sustained attention.

I wondered where Ilam Lake was. I knew merely that it lay somewhere in the environs of the Five Towns. What put fuel on the fire of my interest in the private affairs of the dead painter was the slightly curious coincidence that on the evening of the news of his death, I should be travelling to the Five Towns — and for the first time in my life. Here I was at Knype, which, as I had gathered from Bradshaw, and from my acquaintance Brindley, was the traffic centre of the Five Towns.

II

My knowledge of industrial districts amounted to nothing. Born in Devonshire, educated at Cambridge, and fulfilling my destiny as curator of a certain department of antiquities at the British Museum, I had never been brought into contact with the vast constructive material activities of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Staffordshire. I had but passed through them occasionally on my way to Scotland, scorning their necessary grime with the perhaps too facile disdain of the clean-faced southerner, who is apt to forget that coal cannot walk up unaided out of the mine,

and that the basin which he washes his beautiful purity can only be manufactured amid conditions highly repellent. Well, my impressions of the platform of Knype station were unfavourable. There was dirt in the air; I could feel it at once on my skin. And the scene was shabby, undignified, and rude. I use the word " rude " in all its senses. What I saw was a pushing, exclamatory, ill-dressed, determined crowd, each member of which was bent on the realisation of his own desires by the least ceremonious means. If an item of this throng wished to get past me, he made me instantly aware of his wish by abruptly changing my position in infinite space; it was not possible to misconstrue his meaning. So much crude force and naked will-to-live I had not before set eyes on. In truth, I felt myself to be a very brittle, delicate bit of intellectual machinery in the midst of all these physical manifestations. Yet I am a tallish man, and these potters appeared to me to be undersized, and somewhat thin too! But what elbows! What glaring egoistic eyes! What terrible decisiveness in action!

" Now then, get in if ye're going! " said a red-haired porter to me curtly.

" I'm not going. I've just got out," I replied.

" Well, then, why dunna' ye stand out o' th' wee and let them get in as wants to? "

Unable to offer a coherent answer to this crushing demand, I stood out of the way. In the light of further knowledge I now surmise that that porter was a very friendly and sociable porter. But at the

moment I really believed that, taking me for the least admirable and necessary of God's creatures, he meant to convey his opinion to me for my own good. I glanced up at the lighted windows of the train, and saw the composed, careless faces of haughty persons who were going direct from London to Manchester, and to whom the Five Towns was nothing but a delay. I envied them. I wanted to return to the shelter of the train. When it left, I fancied that my last link with civilisation was broken. Then another train puffed in, and it was simply taken by assault in a fraction of time, to an incomprehensible bawling of friendly sociable porters. Season-ticket holders at Finsbury Park think they know how to possess themselves of a train; they are deceived. So this is where Simon Fuge came from (I reflected)! The devil it is (I reflected)! I tried to conceive what the invaders of the train would exclaim if confronted by one of Simon Fuge's pictures. I could imagine only one word, and that a monosyllable, that would meet the case of their sentiments. And his dalliance, his tangential nocturnal deviations in gondolas with exquisite twin odalisques! There did not seem to be much room for amorous elegance in the lives of these invaders. And his death! What would they say of his death? Upon my soul, as I stood on that dirty platform, in a *milieu* of advertisements of soap, boots, and aperients, I began to believe that Simon Fuge never had lived, that he was a mere illusion of his friends and his small public. All that I saw around me was a violent negation of

Simon Fuge, that entity of rare, fine, exotic sensibilities, that perfectly mad gourmet of sensations, that exotic seer of beauty.

I caught sight of my acquaintance and host, Mr. Robert Brindley, coming towards me on the platform. Hitherto I had only met him in London, when, as chairman of the committee of management of the Wedgwood Institution and School of Art at Bursley, he had called on me at the British Museum for advice as to loan exhibits. He was then dressed like a self-respecting tourist. Now, although an architect by profession, he appeared to be anxious to be mistaken for a sporting squire. He wore very baggy knickerbockers, and leggings, and a cap. This raiment was apparently the agreed uniform of the easy classes in the Five Towns; for in the crowd I had noticed several such consciously superior figures among the artisans. Mr. Brindley, like most of the people in the station, had a slightly pinched and chilled air, as though that morning he had by inadvertence omitted to don those garments which are not seen. He also, like most of the people there, but not to the same extent, had a somewhat suspicious and narrowly shrewd regard, as who should say: "If any person thinks he can get the better of me by a trick, let him try — that's all." But the moment his eye encountered mine, this expression vanished from his face, and he gave me a candid smile.

"I hope you're well," he said gravely, squeezing my hand in a sort of vice that he carried at the end of his right arm.

I reassured him.

"Oh, *I'm* all right," he said, in response to the expression of *my* hopes.

It was a relief to me to see him. He took charge of me. I felt, as it were, safe in his arms. I perceived that, unaided and unprotected, I should never have succeeded in reaching Bursley from Knype.

A whistle sounded.

"Better get in," he suggested; and then in a tone of absolute command: "Give me your bag."

I obeyed. He opened the door of a first-class carriage.

"I'm travelling second," I explained.

"Never mind. Get *in.*"

In his tones was a kindly exasperation.

I got in; he followed. The train moved.

"Ah!" breathed Mr. Brindley, blowing out much air and falling like a sack of coal into a corner seat. He was a thin man, aged about thirty, with brown eyes, and a short blonde beard.

Conversation was at first difficult. Personally I am not a bubbling fount of gay nothings when I find myself alone with a comparative stranger. My drawbridge goes up as if by magic, my postern is closed, and I peer cautiously through the narrow slits of my turret to estimate the chances of peril. Nor was Mr. Brindley offensively affable. However, we struggled into a kind of chatter. I had come to the Five Towns, on behalf of the British Museum, to inspect and appraise, with a view to purchase by the nation, some huge slip-decorated

dishes, excessively curious according to photographs, which had been discovered in the cellars of the Conservative Club at Bursley. Having shared in the negotiations for my visit, Mr. Brindley had invited me to spend the night at his house. We were able to talk about all this. And when we had talked about all this we were able to talk about the singular scenery of coal-dust, pot-sherds, flame and steam, through which the train wound its way. It was squalid ugliness, but it was squalid ugliness on a scale so vast and overpowering that it became sublime. Great furnaces gleamed red in the twilight, and their fires were reflected in horrible black canals; processions of heavy vapour drifted in all directions across the sky, over what acres of mean and miserable brown architecture! The air was alive with the most extraordinary, weird, gigantic sounds. I do not think the Five Towns will ever be described: Dante lived too soon. As for the erratic and exquisite genius, Simon Fuge, and his odalisques reclining on silken cushions on the enchanted bosom of a lake — I could no longer conjure them up faintly in my mind.

"I suppose you know Simon Fuge is dead?" I remarked, in a pause.

"No! Is he?" said Mr. Brindley, with interest. "Is it in the paper?"

He did not seem to be quite sure that it would be in the paper.

"Here it is," said I, and I passed him the *Gazette*.

"Ha!" he exclaimed explosively. This "Ha!"

was entirely different from his "Ah!" Something shot across his eyes, something incredibly rapid — too rapid for a wink; yet it could only be called a wink. It was the most subtle transmission of the beyond-speech that I have ever known any man accomplish, and it endeared Mr. Brindley to me. But I knew not its significance.

"What do they think of Fuge down here?" I asked.

"I don't expect they think of him," said my host.

He pulled a pouch and a packet of cigarette papers from his pocket.

"Have one of mine," I suggested, hastily producing my case.

He did not even glance at its contents.

"No, thanks," he said curtly.

I named my brand.

"My dear sir," he said, with a return of his kindly exasperation, "no cigarette that is not fresh made can be called a cigarette." I stood corrected. "You may pay as much as you like, but you can never buy cigarettes as good as I can make out of an ounce of fresh B.D.V. tobacco. Can you roll one?" I had to admit that I could not, I who in Bloomsbury was accepted as an authority on cigarettes as well as on porcelain. "I'll roll you one, and you shall try it."

He did so.

I gathered from his solemnity that cigarettes counted in the life of Mr. Brindley. He could not take cigarettes other than seriously. The worst of it was that he was quite right. The cigarette which he

constructed for me out of his wretched B.D.V. tobacco was adorable, and I have made my own cigarettes ever since. You will find B.D.V. tobacco all over the haunts frequented by us of the Museum now-a-days, solely owing to the expertise of Mr. Brindley. A terribly capable and positive man! He *knew,* and he knew that he knew.

He said nothing further as to Simon Fuge. Apparently he had forgotten the decease.

"Do you often see the *Gazette?*" I asked, perhaps in the hope of attracting him back to Fuge.

"No," he said; "the musical criticism is too rotten."

Involuntarily I bridled. It was startling, and it was not agreeable, to have one's favourite organ so abruptly condemned by a provincial architect in knickerbockers and a cap, in the midst of all that industrial ugliness. What could the Five Towns know about art? Yet here was this fellow condemning the *Gazette* on artistic grounds. I offered no defence, because he was right — again. But I did not like it.

"Do you ever see the *Manchester Guardian?*" he questioned, carrying the war into my camp.

"No," I said.

"Pity!" he ejaculated.

"I've often heard that it's a very good paper," I said politely.

"It isn't a very good paper," he laid me low. "It's the best paper in the world. Try it for a month — it gets to Euston at half-past eight — and then tell me what you think."

I saw that I must pull myself together. I had glided into the Five Towns in a mood of gentle, wise condescension. I saw that it would be as well, for my own honour and safety, to put on another mood as quickly as possible, otherwise I might be left for dead on the field. Certainly the fellow was provincial, curt, even brutal in his despisal of diplomacy. Certainly he exaggerated the importance of cigarettes in the great secular scheme of evolution. But he was a man; he was a very tonic dose. I thought it would be safer to assume that he knew everything, and that the British Museum knew very little. Yet at the British Museum he had been quite different, quite deferential and rather timid. Still, I liked him. I liked his eyes.

The train stopped at an incredible station situated in the centre of a rolling desert whose surface consisted of broken pots and cinders. I expect no one to believe this.

"Here we are," said he blithely. "No, give me the bag. Porter!"

His summons to the solitary porter was like a clap of thunder.

III

He lived in a low, blackish-crimson heavy-browed house at the corner of a street along which electric cars were continually thundering. There was a thin cream of mud on the pavements and about two inches of mud in the roadway, rich, nourishing mud like India ink half-mixed. The prospect of carrying

a pound or so of that unique mud into a civilised house affrighted me, but Mr. Brindley opened his door with his latchkey and entered the abode as unconcernedly as if some fair repentant had cleansed his feet with her tresses.

"Don't worry too much about the dirt," he said. "You're in Bursley."

The house seemed much larger inside than out. A gas-jet burnt in the hall, and sombre portières gave large mysterious hints of rooms. I could hear, in the distance, the noise of frizzling over a fire, and of a child crying. Then a tall, straight, well-made, energetic woman appeared like a conjuring trick from behind a portière.

"How do you do, Mr. Loring?" she greeted me, smiling. "So glad to meet you."

"My wife," Mr. Brindley explained gravely.

"Now, I may as well tell you now, Bob," said she, still smiling at me. "Bobbie's got a sore throat and it may be mumps; the chimney's been on fire and we're going to be summoned; and you owe me sixpence."

"Why do I owe you sixpence?"

"Because Annie's had her baby and it's a girl."

"That's all right. Supper ready?"

"Supper is waiting for you."

She laughed. "Whenever I have anything to tell my husband, I always tell him *at once!*" she said. "No matter who's there." She pronounced "once" with a whole-hearted enthusiasm for its vowel sound that I have never heard equalled elsewhere, and also

with a very magnified " w " at the beginning of it. Often when I hear the word " once " pronounced in less downright parts of the world, I remember how they pronounce it in the Five Towns, and there rises up before me a complete picture of the district, its atmosphere, its spirit.

Mr. Brindley led me to a large bathroom that had a faint odour of warm linen. In addition to a lot of assorted white baby-clothes there were millions of towels in that bathroom. He turned on a tap and the place was instantly full of steam from a jet of boiling water.

" Now, then," he said, " you can start."

As he showed no intention of leaving me, I did start. " Mind you don't scald yourself," he warned me, " that water's *hot.*" While I was washing, he prepared to wash. I suddenly felt as if I had been intimate with him and his wife for about ten years.

" So this is Bursley! " I murmured, taking my mouth out of a towel.

" Bosley, we call it," he said. " Do you know the limerick —' There was a young woman of Bosley ' ? "

" No."

He intoned the local limerick. It was excellently good; not meet for a mixed company, but a genuine delight to the true amateur. One good limerick deserves another. It happened that I knew a number of the unprinted Rossetti limericks, precious things, not at all easy to get at. I detailed them to Mr. Brindley, and I do not exaggerate when I say that I impressed him. I recovered all the ground I had

lost upon cigarettes and newspapers. He appreciated those limericks with a juster taste than I should have expected. So, afterwards, did his friends. My belief is that I am to this day known and revered in Bursley, not as Loring the porcelain expert from the British Museum, but as the man who first, as it were, brought the good news of the Rossetti limericks from Ghent to Aix.

"Now, Bob," an amicable voice shrieked femininely up from the ground-floor, "am I to send the soup up to the bathroom or are you coming down?"

A limerick will make a man forget even his dinner.

Mr. Brindley performed once more with his eyes that something that was, not a wink, but a wink unutterably refined and spiritualised. This time I comprehended its import. Its import was to the effect that women are women.

We descended, Mr. Brindley still in his knickerbockers.

"This way," he said, drawing aside a portière. Mrs. Brindley, as we entered the room, was trotting a male infant round and round a table charged with everything digestible and indigestible. She handed the child, who was in its nightdress, to a maid.

"Say good-night to father."

"Good-ni', faver," the interesting creature piped.

"By-bye, sonny," said the father, stooping to tickle. "I suppose," he added, when maid and infant had gone, "if one's going to have mumps, they may as well all have it together."

"Oh, of course," the mother agreed cheerfully. "I shall stick them all into a room."

"How many children have you?" I inquired with polite curiosity.

"Three," she said; "that's the eldest that you've seen."

What chiefly struck me about Mrs. Brindley was her serene air of capableness, of having a self-confidence which experience had richly justified. I could see that she must be an extremely sensible mother. And yet she had quite another aspect too — how shall I explain it — as though she had only had children in her spare time.

We sat down. The room was lighted by four candles on the table. I am rather short-sighted, and so I did not immediately notice that there were low book-cases all round the walls. Why the presence of these book-cases should have caused me a certain astonishment I do not know, but it did. I thought of Knype station, and the scenery, and then the other little station, and the desert of pots and cinders, and the mud in the road and on the pavement and in the hall, and the baby-linen in the bathroom, and three children all down with mumps, and Mr. Brindley's cap and knickerbockers and cigarettes; and somehow the books — I soon saw there were at least a thousand of them, and not circulating-library books, either, but *books* — well, they administered a little shock to me.

To Mr. Brindley's right hand was a bottle of Bass and a corkscrew.

"Beer!" he exclaimed, with solemn ecstasy, with an ecstasy gross and luscious. And, drawing the cork, he poured out a glass, with fine skill in the management of froth, and pushed it towards me.

"No, thanks," I said.

"No beer!" he murmured, with benevolent, puzzled disdain. "Whisky?"

"No, thanks," I said. "Water."

"*I* know what Mr. Loring would like," said Mrs. Brindley, jumping up. "I *know* what Mr. Loring would like." She opened a cupboard and came back to the table with a bottle, which she planted in front of me. "Wouldn't you, Mr. Loring?"

It was a bottle of mercurey, a wine which has given me many dreadful dawns, but which I have never known how to refuse.

"I should," I admitted; "but it's very bad for me."

"Nonsense!" said she. She looked at her husband in triumph.

"Beer!" repeated Mr. Brindley with undiminished ecstasy, and drank about two-thirds of a glass at one try. Then he wiped the froth from his moustache. "Ah!" he breathed low and soft. "Beer!"

They called the meal supper. The term is inadequate. No term that I could think of would be adequate. Of its kind the thing was perfect. Mrs. Brindley knew that it was perfect. Mr. Brindley also knew that it was perfect. There were prawns

in aspic. I don't know why I should single out that dish, except that it seemed strange to me to have crossed the desert of pots and cinders in order to encounter prawns in aspic. Mr. Brindley ate more cold roast beef than I had ever seen any man eat before, and more pickled walnuts. It is true that the cold roast beef transcended all the cold roast beef of my experience. Mrs. Brindley regaled herself largely on trifle, which Mr. Brindley would not approach, preferring a most glorious Stilton cheese. I lost touch, temporarily, with the intellectual life. It was Mr. Brindley who recalled me to it.

"Jane," he said. (This was at the beef and pickles stage.)

No answer.

"Jane!"

Mrs. Brindley turned to me. "My name is not Jane," she said, laughing, and making a *move* simultaneously. "He only calls me that to annoy me. I told him I wouldn't answer to it, and I won't. He thinks I shall give in because we've got 'company'! But I won't treat you as 'company,' Mr. Loring, and I shall expect you to take my side. What dreadful weather we're having, aren't we?"

"Dreadful!" I joined in the game.

"Jane!"

"Did you have a comfortable journey down?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Well, then, Mary!" Mr. Brindley yielded.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Loring, for your kind assistance," said his wife. "Yes, dearest?"

Mr. Brindley glanced at me over his second glass of beer.

"If those confounded kids are going to have mumps," he addressed his words apparently into the interior of the glass, "it probably means the doctor, and the doctor means money, and I shan't be able to afford the *Hortulus Animæ*."

I opened my ears.

"My husband goes stark staring mad sometimes," said Mrs. Brindley to me. "It lasts for a week or so, and pretty nearly lands us in the workhouse. This time it's the *Hortulus Animæ*. Do you know what it is? I don't."

"No," I said, and the prestige of the British Museum trembled. Then I had a vague recollection. "There's an illuminated manuscript of that name in the Imperial Library of Vienna, isn't there?"

"You've got it in once," said Mr. Brindley. "Wife, pass those walnuts."

"You aren't by any chance buying it?" I laughed.

"No," he said. "A Johnny at Utrecht is issuing a facsimile of it, with all the hundred odd miniatures in colour. It will be the finest thing in reproduction ever done. Only seventy-five copies for England."

"How much?" I asked.

"Well," said he, with a preliminary look at his wife, "thirty-three pounds."

"Thirty-three *pounds!*" she screamed. "You never told me."

"My wife never will understand," said Mr. Brindley, "that complete confidence between two human beings is impossible."

"I shall go out as a milliner, that's all," Mrs. Brindley returned. "Remember, the *Dictionary of National Biography* isn't paid for yet."

"I'm glad I forgot that, otherwise I shouldn't have ordered the *Hortulus.*"

"You've not *ordered* it?"

"Yes, I have. It'll be here to-morrow — at least the first part will."

Mrs. Brindley affected to fall back dying in her chair.

"Quite mad!" she complained to me. "Quite mad. It's a hopeless case."

But obviously she was very proud of the incurable lunatic.

"But you're a book collector!" I exclaimed, so struck by these feats of extravagance in a modest house that I did not conceal my amazement.

"Did you think I collected postage stamps?" the husband retorted. "No, *I'm* not a book collector, but our doctor is. He *has* got a few books, if you like. Still, I wouldn't swop him; he's much too fond of fashionable novels."

"You know you're always up at his place," said the wife; "and I wonder what *I* should do if it wasn't for the doctor's novels!" The doctor was evidently a favourite of hers.

"I'm not always up at his place," the husband contradicted. "You know perfectly well I never

go there before midnight. And *he* knows perfectly well that I only go because he has the best whisky in the town. By the way, I wonder whether he knows that Simon Fuge is dead. He's got one of his etchings. I'll go up."

"Who's Simon Fuge?" asked Mrs. Brindley.

"Don't you remember old Fuge that kept the Blue Bell at Cauldon?"

"What? Simple Simon?"

"Yes. Well, his son."

"Oh! I remember. He ran away from home once, didn't he, and his mother had a port-wine stain on her left cheek? Oh, of course. I remember him perfectly. He came down to the Five Towns some years ago for his aunt's funeral. So he's dead. Who told you?"

"Mr. Loring."

"Did you know him?" she glanced at me.

"I scarcely knew him," said I. "I saw it in the paper."

"What, the *Signal?*"

"The *Signal's* the local rag," Mr. Brindley interpolated. "No. It's in the *Gazette.*"

"The *Birmingham Gazette?*"

"No, bright creature — *the Gazette,*" said Mr. Brindley.

"Oh!" She seemed puzzled.

"Didn't you know he was a painter?" the husband condescendingly catechised.

"I knew he used to teach at the Hanbridge School of Art," said Mrs. Brindley stoutly. "Mother

wouldn't let me go there because of that. Then he got the sack."

"Poor defenceless thing! How old were you?"

"Seventeen, I expect."

"I'm much obliged to your mother."

"Where did he die?" Mrs. Brindley demanded.

"At San Remo," I answered. "Seems queer him dying at San Remo in September, doesn't it?"

"Why?"

"San Remo is a winter place. No one ever goes there before December."

"Oh, is it?" the lady murmured negligently. "Then that would be just like Simon Fuge. *I* was never afraid of him," she added, in a defiant tone, and with a delicious inconsequence that choked her husband in the midst of a draught of beer.

"You can laugh," she said sturdily.

At that moment there was heard a series of loud explosive sounds in the street. They continued for a few seconds apparently just outside the dining-room window. Then they stopped, and the noise of the bumping electric cars resumed its sway over the ear.

"That's Oliver!" said Mr. Brindley, looking at his watch. "He must have come from Manchester in an hour and a half. He's a terror."

"Glass! Quick!" Mrs. Brindley exclaimed. She sprang to the sideboard and seized a tumbler, which Mr. Brindley filled from a second bottle of Bass. When the door of the room opened she was

standing close to it, laughing, with the full, frothing glass in her hand.

A tall, thin man, rather younger than Mr. Brindley and his wife, entered. He wore a long dust-coat and leggings, and he carried a motorist's cap in a great hand. No one spoke; but little puffs of laughter escaped all Mrs. Brindley's efforts to imprison her mirth. Then the visitor took the glass with a magnificent broad smile, and said, in a rich and heavy Midland voice —

"Here's to moy wife's husband!"

And drained the nectar.

"Feel better now, don't you?" Mrs. Brindley inquired.

"Ay, Mrs. Bob, I do!" was the reply. "How do, Bob?"

"How do?" responded my host laconically. And then with gravity: "Mr. Loring — Mr. Oliver Colclough — thinks he knows something about music."

"Glad to meet you, sir," said Mr. Colclough, shaking hands with me. He had a most attractively candid smile, but he was so long and lanky that he seemed to pervade the room like an omnipresence.

"Sit down and have a bit of cheese, Oliver," said Mrs. Brindley, as she herself sat down.

"No, thanks, Mrs. Bob. I must be getting towards home."

He leaned on her chair.

"Trifle, then?"

"No, thanks."

"Machine going all right?"

"Like oil. Never stopped th' engine once."

"Did you get the *Sinfonia Domestica,* Ol?" Mr. Brindley enquired.

"Didn't I say as I should get it, Bob?"

"You *said* you would."

"Well, I've got it."

"In Manchester?"

"Of course."

Mr. Brindley's face shone with desire and Mr. Oliver Colclough's face shone with triumph.

"Where is it?"

"In the hall."

"My hall?"

"Ay!"

"We'll play it, Ol."

"No, really Bob! I can't stop now. I promised the wife ——"

"We'll *play* it, Ol! You'd no business to make promises. Besides, suppose you'd had a puncture!"

"I expect you've heard Strauss's *Sinfonia Domestica,* Mr. Loring, up in the village?" Mr. Colclough addressed me. He had surrendered to the stronger will.

"In London?" I said. "No. But I've heard of it."

"Bob and I heard it in Manchester last week, and we thought it 'ud be a bit of a lark to buy the arrangement for pianoforte duet."

"Come and listen to it," said Mr. Brindley. "That is, if nobody wants any more beer."

IV

The drawing-room was about twice as large as the dining-room, and it contained about four times as much furniture. Once again there were books all round the walls. A grand piano, covered with music, stood in a corner, and behind was a cabinet full of bound music.

Mr. Brindley, seated on one corner of the bench in front of the piano, cut the leaves of the *Sinfonia Domestica.*

"It's the devil!" he observed.

"Ay, lad!" agreed Mr. Colclough, standing over him. "It's difficult."

"Come on," said Mr. Brindley, when he had finished cutting.

"Better take your dust-coat off, hadn't you?" Mrs. Brindley suggested to the friend. She and I were side by side on a sofa at the other end of the room.

"I may as well," Mr. Colclough admitted, and threw the long garment on to a chair. "Look here, Bob, my hands are stiff with steering."

"Don't find fault with your tools," said Mr. Brindley; "and sit down. No, my boy, I'm going to play the top part. Shove along."

"I want to play the top part because it's easiest," Mr. Colclough grumbled.

"How often have I told you the top part is never easiest? Who do you suppose is going to keep this symphony together — you or me?"

"Sorry I spoke."

They arranged themselves on the bench, and Mr. Brindley turned up the lower corners of every alternate leaf of the music.

"Now," said he. "Ready?"

"Let her zip," said Mr. Colclough.

They began to play. And then the door opened, and a servant, whose white apron was starched as stiff as cardboard, came in carrying a tray of coffee and unholy liqueurs, which she deposited with a rattle on a small table near the hostess.

"Curse!" muttered Mr. Brindley, and stopped.

"Life's very complex, ain't it, Bob?" Mr. Colclough murmured.

"Ay, lad." The host glanced round to make sure that the rattling servant had entirely gone. "Now, start again."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" cried Mrs. Brindley excitedly. "I'm just pouring out Mr. Loring's coffee. There!" As she handed me the cup she whispered, "We daren't talk. It's more than our place is worth."

The performance of the symphony proceeded. To me, who am not a performer, it sounded excessively brilliant and incomprehensible. Mr. Colclough stretched his right hand to turn over the page, and fumbled it. Another stoppage.

"Damn you, Ol!" Mr. Brindley exploded. "I wish you wouldn't make yourself so confoundedly busy. Leave the turning to me. It takes a great artist to turn over, and you're only a blooming chauffeur. We'll begin again."

"Sackcloth!" Mr. Colclough whispered.

I could not estimate the length of the symphony; but my impression was one of extreme length. Half-way through it the players both took their coats off. Then there was no other surcease.

"What dost think of it, Bob?" asked Mr. Colclough in the weird silence that reigned after they had finished. They were standing up and putting on their coats and wiping their faces.

"I think what I thought before," said Mr. Brindley. "It's childish."

"It isn't childish," the other protested. "It's ugly, but it isn't childish."

"It's childishly clever," Mr. Brindley modified his description. He did not ask my opinion.

"Coffee's cold," said Mrs. Brindley.

"I don't want any coffee. Give me some Chartreuse, please. Have a drop o' green, Ol?"

"A split soda 'ud be more in my line. Besides, I'm just going to have my supper. Never mind, I'll have a drop, missis, and chance it. I've never tried Chartreuse as an appetizer."

At this point commenced a sanguinary conflict of wills to settle whether or not I also should indulge in green Chartreuse. I was defeated. Besides the Chartreuse, I accepted a cigar. Never before or since have I been such a buck.

"I must hook it," said Mr. Colclough, picking up his dust-coat.

"Not yet you don't," said Mr. Brindley. "I've got to get the taste of that infernal Strauss out of my

mouth. We'll play the first movement of the G minor? *La-la-la — la-la-la — la-la-la-ta.*" He whistled a phrase.

Mr. Colclough obediently sat down again to the piano.

The Mozart was like an idyll after a farcical melodrama. They played it with an astonishing delicacy. Through the latter half of the movement I could hear Mr. Brindley breathing regularly and heavily through his nose, exactly as though he were being hypnotised. I had a tickling sensation in the small of my back, a sure sign of emotion in me. The atmosphere was changed.

"What a heavenly thing!" I exclaimed enthusiastically, when they had finished.

Mr. Brindley looked at me sharply, and just nodded in silence. "Well, good-night, Ol."

"I say," said Mr. Colclough; "if you've nothing doing later on, bring Mr. Loring round to my place. Will you come, Mr. Loring? Do! Us'll have a drink."

These Five Towns people certainly had a simple, sincere way of offering hospitality that was quite irresistible. One could see that hospitality was among their chief and keenest pleasures.

We all went to the front door to see Mr. Colclough depart homewards in his automobile. The two great acetylene head-lights sent long glaring shafts of light down the side street. Mr. Colclough, throwing the score of the *Sinfonia Domestica* into the tonneau of the immense car, put on a pair of

gloves and began to circulate round the machine, tapping here, screwing there, as chauffeurs will. Then he bent down in front to start the engine.

"By the way, Ol," Mr. Brindley shouted from the doorway, "it seems Simon Fuge is dead."

We could see the man's stooping form between the two head-lights. He turned his head towards the house.

"Who the dagger is Simon Fuge?" he enquired. "There's about five thousand Fuges in th' Five Towns."

"Oh! I thought you knew him."

"I might, and I mightn't. It's not one o' them Fuge brothers saggar-makers at Longshaw, is it?"

"No. It's ——"

Mr. Colclough had succeeded in starting his engine, and the air was rent with gun-shots. He jumped lightly into the driver's seat.

"Well, see you later," he cried, and was off, persuading the enormous beast under him to describe a semicircle in the narrow street, backing, forcing forward, and backing again, to the accompaniment of the continuous fusillade. At length he got away, drew up within two feet of an electric tram that slid bumping down the main street, and vanished round the corner. A little ragged boy passed, crying, "*Signal,* extra," and Br. Brindley hailed him.

"What *is* Mr. Colclough?" I asked in the drawing-room.

"Manufacturer — sanitary ware," said Mr.

Brindley. "He's got one of the best businesses in Hanbridge. I wish I'd half his income. Never buys a book, you know."

"He seems to play the piano very well."

"Well, as to that, he doesn't what you may call *play,* but he's the best sight-reader in this district, bar one. I never met his equal. When you come across any one who can read a thing like the Domestic Symphony right off and never miss his place, you might send me a telegram. Colclough's got a Steinway. Wish I had."

Mrs. Brindley had been looking through the *Signal.*

"I don't see anything about Simon Fuge here," said she.

"Oh, nonsense!" said her husband. "Buchanan's sure to have got something in about it. Let's look."

He received the paper from his wife, but failed to discover in it a word concerning the death of Simon Fuge.

"Dashed if I don't ring Buchanan up and ask him what he means! Here's a paper with an absolute monopoly in the district, and brings in about five thousand a year clear to somebody, and it doesn't give the news! There never is anything but advertisements and sporting results in the blessed thing."

He rushed to his telephone, which was in the hall. Or rather, he did not rush; he went extremely quickly, with aggressive footsteps that seemed to

symbolise just retribution. We could hear him at the telephone.

"Hello! No. Yes. Is that you, Buchanan? Well, I want Mr. Buchanan. Is that you, Buchanan? Yes, I'm all right. What in thunder do you mean by having nothing in to-night about Simon Fuge's death? Eh? Yes, the *Gazette*. Well, I suppose you aren't Scotch for nothing. Why the devil couldn't you stop in Scotland and edit papers there?" Then a laugh. "I see. Yes. What did you think of those cigars? Oh! See you at dinner. Ta-ta." A final ring.

"The real truth is, he wanted some advice as to the tone of his obituary notice," said Mr. Brindley, coming back into the drawing-room. "He's got it, seemingly. He says he's writing it now, for to-morrow. He didn't put in the mere news of the death, because it was exclusive to the *Gazette,* and he's been having some difficulty with the *Gazette* lately. As he says, to-morrow afternoon will be quite soon enough for the Five Towns. It isn't as if Simon Fuge was a cricket match. So now you see how the wheels go round, Mr. Loring."

He sat down to the piano and began to play softly the Castle motive from the *Nibelung's Ring*. He kept repeating it in different keys.

"What about the mumps, wife?" he asked Mrs. Brindley, who had been out of the room and now returned.

"Oh! I don't think it is mumps," she replied. "They're all asleep."

"Good!" he murmured, still playing the Castle motive.

"Talking of Simon Fuge," I said, determined to satisfy my curiosity, "who *were* the two sisters?"

"What two sisters?"

"That he spent the night in the boat with, on Ilam Lake."

"Was that in the *Gazette?* I didn't read all the article."

He changed abruptly into the Sword motive, which he gave with a violent flourish, and then he left the piano.

"I do beg you not to wake my children," said his wife.

"Your children must get used to my piano," said he. "Now, then, what about these two sisters?"

I pulled the *Gazette* from my pocket and handed it to him. He read aloud the passage describing the magic night on the lake.

"*I* don't know who they were," he said. "Probably something tasty from the Hanbridge Empire."

We both observed a faint, amused smile on the face of Mrs. Brindley, the smile of a woman who has suddenly discovered in her brain a piece of knowledge rare and piquant.

"I can guess who they were," she said. "In fact, I'm sure."

"Who?"

"Annie Brett and — you know who."

"What, down at the Tiger?"

"Certainly. Hush!" Mrs. Brindley ran to the

door and, opening it, listened. The faint, fretful cry of a child reached us. "There! You've done it! I told you you would!"

She disappeared. Mr. Brindley whistled.

"And who is Annie Brett?" I enquired.

"Look here," said he, with a peculiar inflection. "Would you like to see her?"

"I should," I said with decision.

"Well, come on, then. We'll go down to the Tiger and have a drop of something."

"And the other sister?" I asked.

"The other sister is Mrs. Oliver Colclough," he answered. "Curious, ain't it?"

Again there was that swift, scarcely perceptible phenomenon in his eyes.

V

We stood at the corner of the side-street and the main road, and down the main road a vast, white rectangular cube of bright light came plunging — its head rising and dipping — at express speed, and with a formidable roar. Mr. Brindley imperiously raised his stick; the extraordinary box of light stopped as if by a miracle, and we jumped into it, having splashed through mud, and it plunged off again — bump, bump, bump — into the town of Bursley. As Mr. Brindley passed into the interior of the car, he said laconically to two men who were smoking on the platform —

"How do, Jim? How do, Jo?"

And they responded laconically —

"How do, Bob?"

"How do, Bob?"

We sat down. Mr. Brindley pointed to the condition of the floor.

"Cheerful, isn't it?" he observed to me, shouting above the din of vibrating glass.

Our fellow-passengers were few and unromantic, perhaps half-a-dozen altogether on the long, shiny, yellow seats of the car, each apparently lost in gloomy reverie.

"It's the advertisements and notices in these cars that are the joy of the super-man like you and me," shouted Mr. Brindley. "Look there, 'Passengers are requested not to spit on the floor.' Simply an encouragement to lie on the seats and spit on the ceiling, isn't it? 'Wear only Noble's wonderful boots.' Suppose we did! Unless they came well up above the waist we should be prosecuted. But there's no sense of humour in this district."

Greengrocers' shops and public-houses were now flying past the windows of the car. It began to climb a hill, and then halted.

"Here we are!" ejaculated Mr. Brindley.

And he was out of the car almost before I had risen.

We strolled along a quiet street, and came to a large building with many large lighted windows, evidently some result of public effort.

"What's that place?" I demanded.

"That's the Wedgwood Institution."

"Oh! So that's the Wedgwood Institution, is it?"

"Yes. Commonly called the Wedgwood. Museum, reading-room, public library — dirtiest books in the world, I mean physically — art school, science school. I've never explained to you why I'm chairman of the Management Committee, have I? Well, it's because the Institution is meant to foster the arts, and I happen to know nothing about 'em. I needn't tell you that architecture, literature and music are not arts within the meaning of the act. Not much! Like to come in and see the museum for a minute? You'll have to see it in your official capacity to-morrow."

We crossed the road, and entered an imposing portico. Just as we did so a thick stream of slouching men began to descend the steps, like a waterfall of treacle. Mr. Brindley they appeared to see, but evidently I made no impression on their retinas. They bore down the steps, hands deep in pockets, sweeping over me like Fate. Even when I bounced off one of them to a lower step, he showed by no sign that the fact of my existence had reached his consciousness — simply bore irresistibly downwards. The crowd was absolutely silent. At last I gained the entrance hall.

"It's closing-time for the reading-room," said Mr. Brindley.

"I'm glad I survived it," I said.

"The truth is," said he, "that people who can't look after themselves don't flourish in these lati-

tudes. But you'll be acclimatised by to-morrow. See that?"

He pointed to an alabaster tablet on which was engraved a record of the historical certainty that Mr. Gladstone opened the Institution in 1868, also an extract from the speech which he delivered on that occasion.

"What do you *think* of Gladstone down here?" I demanded.

"In my official capacity I think that these deathless words are the last utterance of wisdom on the subject of the influence of the liberal arts on life. And I should advise you, in your official capacity, to think the same, unless you happen to have a fancy for having your teeth knocked down your throat."

"I see," I said, not sure how to take him.

"Lest you should go away with the idea that you have been visiting a rude and barbaric people, I'd better explain that that was a joke. As a matter of fact, we're rather enlightened here. The only man who stands a chance of getting his teeth knocked down his throat here is the ingenious person who started the celebrated legend of the man-and-dog fight at Hanbridge. It's a long time ago, a very long time ago; but his grey hairs won't save him from horrible tortures if we catch him. We don't mind being called immoral, we're above a bit flattered when London newspapers come out with shocking details of debauchery in the Five Towns, but we pride ourselves on our manners. I say, Aked!" His voice rose commandingly, threaten-

ingly, to an old bent, spectacled man who was ascending a broad white staircase in front of us.

"Sir!" The man turned.

"Don't turn the lights out yet in the museum."

"No, sir? Are you coming up?" The accents were slow and tremulous.

"Yes. I have a gentleman here from the British Museum who wants to look round."

The oldish man came deliberately down the steps, and approached us. Then his gaze, beginning at my waist, gradually rose to my hat.

"From the *British* Museum?" he drawled. "I'm sure I'm very glad to meet you, sir. I'm sure it's a very great honour."

He held out a wrinkled hand, which I shook.

"Mr. Aked," said Mr. Brindley, by way of introduction. "Been caretaker here for pretty near forty years."

"Ever since it opened, sir," said Aked.

We went up the white stone stairway, rather a grandiose construction for a little industrial town. It divided itself into double curving flights at the first landing, and its walls were covered with pictures and designs. The museum itself, a series of three communicating rooms, was about as large as a pocket-handkerchief.

"Quite small," I said.

I gave my impression candidly, because I had already judged Mr. Brindley to be the rare and precious individual who is worthy of the high honour of frankness.

"Do you think so?" he demanded quickly. I had shocked him, that was clear. His tone was unmistakable; it indicated an instinctive, involuntary protest. But he recovered himself in a flash. "That's jealousy," he laughed. "All you British Museum people are the same." Then he added, with an unsuccessful attempt to convince me that he meant what he was saying: "Of course it *is* small. It's nothing, simply nothing."

Yes, I had unwittingly found the joint in the armour of this extraordinary Midland personage. With all his irony, with all his violent humour, with all his just and unprejudiced perception, he had a tenderness for the Institution of which he was the dictator. He loved it. He could laugh like a god at everything in the Five Towns except this one thing. He would try to force himself to regard even this with the same lofty detachment, but he could not do it naturally.

I stopped at a case of Wedgwood ware, marked "Perkins Collection."

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, pointing to a vase. "What a body!"

He was enchanted by my enthusiasm.

"Funny you should have hit on that," said he. "Old Daddy Perkins always called it his ewe-lamb."

Thus spoken, the name of the greatest authority on Wedgwood ware that Europe has ever known curiously impressed me.

"I suppose you knew him?" I questioned.

"Considering that I was one of the pall-bearers at his funeral, and caught the champion cold of my life!"

"What sort of a man was he?"

"Outside Wedgwood ware he wasn't any sort of a man. He was that scourge of society, a philanthropist," said Mr. Brindley. "He was an upright citizen, and two thousand people followed him to his grave. I'm an upright citizen, but I have no hope that two thousand people will follow me to my grave."

"You never know what may happen," I observed, smiling.

"No." He shook his head. "If you undermine the moral character of your fellow-citizens by a long course of unbridled miscellaneous philanthropy, you can have a funeral procession as long as you like, at the rate of about forty shillings a foot. But you'll never touch the great heart of the enlightened public of these boroughs in any other way. Do you imagine any one cared a twopenny damn for Perkins's Wedgwood ware?"

"It's like that everywhere," I said.

"I suppose it is," he assented unwillingly.

Who can tell what was passing in the breast of Mr. Brindley? I could not. At least I could not tell with any precision. I could only gather, vaguely, that what he considered the wrong-headedness, the blindness, the lack of true perception, of *his* public was beginning to produce in his individuality a faint trace of permanent soreness. I regretted it.

And I showed my sympathy with him by asking questions about the design and construction of the museum (a late addition to the Institution), of which I happened to know that he had been the architect.

He at once became interested and interesting. Although he perhaps insisted a little too much on the difficulties which occur when original talent encounters stupidity, he did, as he walked me up and down, contrive to convey to me a notion of the creative processes of the architect in a way that was in my experience entirely novel. He was impressing me anew, and I was wondering whether he was unique of his kind or whether there existed regiments of him in this strange parcel of England.

"Now, you see this girder," he said, looking upwards.

"That's surely something of Fuge's, isn't it?" I asked, indicating a small picture in a corner, after he had finished his explanation of the functions of the girder.

As on the walls of the staircase and corridors, so on the walls here, there were many paintings, drawings and engravings. And of course the best were here in the museum. The least uninteresting items of the collection were, speaking generally, reproductions in monotint of celebrated works, and a few second- or third-rate loan pictures from South Kensington. Aside from such matters I had noticed nothing but the usual local trivialities, gifts from one citizen or another, travel-jottings of some art-

master, careful daubs of apt students without a sense of humour. The aspect of the place was exactly the customary aspect of the small provincial museum, as I have seen it in half-a-hundred towns that are not among "the great towns." It had the terrible trite "museum" aspect, the aspect that brings woe and desolation to the heart of the stoutest visitor, and which seems to form part of the purgatorio of Bank-holidays, wide mouths, and stiff clothes. The movement for opening museums on Sundays is the most natural movement that could be conceived. For if ever a resort was invented and foreordained to chime with the true spirit of the British sabbath, that resort is the average museum. I ought to know. I do know.

But there was the incomparable Wedgwood ware, and there was the little picture by Simon Fuge. I am not going to lose my sense of perspective concerning Simon Fuge. He was not the greatest painter that ever lived, or even of his time. He had, I am ready to believe, very grave limitations. But he was a painter by himself, as all fine painters are. He had his own vision. He was unique. He was exclusively preoccupied with the beauty and the romance of the authentic. The little picture showed all this. It was a painting, unfinished, of a girl standing at a door and evidently hesitating whether to open the door or not: a very young girl, very thin, with long legs in black stockings, and short, white, untidy frock; thin bare arms; the head

thrown on one side, and the hands raised, and one foot raised, in a wonderful childish gesture — the gesture of an undecided fox-terrier. The face was an infant's face, utterly innocent; and yet Simon Fuge had somehow caught in that face a glimpse of all the future of the woman that the girl was to be, he had displayed with exquisite insolence the essential naughtiness of his vision of things. The thing was not much more than a sketch; it was a happy accident, perhaps, in some day's work of Simon Fuge's. But it was genius. When once you had yielded to it, there was no other picture in the room. It killed everything else. But, wherever it had found itself, nothing could have killed *it*. Its success was undeniable, indestructible. And it glowed sombrely there on the wall, a few splashes of colour on a morsel of canvas, and it was Simon Fuge's unconscious, proud challenge to the Five Towns. It *was* Simon Fuge, at any rate all of Simon Fuge that was worth having, masterful, imperishable. And not merely was it his challenge, it was his scorn, his aristocratic disdain, his positive assurance that in the battle between them he had annihilated the Five Towns. It hung there in the very midst thereof, calmly and contemptuously waiting for the acknowledgment of his victory.

"Which?" said Mr. Brindley.

"That one."

"Yes, I fancy it is," he negligently agreed. "Yes, it is."

"It's not signed," I remarked.

"It ought to be," said Mr. Brindley; then laughed, "Too late now!"

"How did it get here?"

"Don't know. Oh! I think Mr. Perkins won it in a raffle at a bazaar, and then hung it here. He did as he liked here, you know."

I was just going to become vocal in its praise when Mr. Brindley said —

"That thing under it is a photograph of a drinking-cup for which one of our pupils won a national scholarship last year."

Mr. Aked appeared in the distance.

"I fancy the old boy wants to be off to bed," Mr. Brindley whispered kindly.

So we left the Wedgwood Institution. I began to talk to Mr. Brindley about music. The barbaric attitude of the Five Towns towards great music was the theme of some very lively animadversions on his part.

VI

The Tiger was very conveniently close to the Wedgwood Institution. The Tiger had a "yard," one of those long, shapeless expanses of the planet, partly paved with uneven cobbles and partly unsophisticated itself, without which no provincial hotel can call itself respectable. We came into it from the hinterland through a wooden doorway in a brick wall. Far off I could see one light burning. We were in the centre of Bursley, the gold angel of its Town Hall rose handsomely over the roof of

the hotel in the diffused moonlight, but we might have been in the purlieus of some dubious establishment on the confines of a great seaport, where anything may happen. The yard was so deserted, so mysterious, so shut in, so silent, that, really, infamous characters ought to have rushed out at us from the obscurity of shadows, and felled us to the earth with no other attendant phenomenon than a low groan. There are places where one seems to feel how thin and brittle is the crust of law and order. Why one should be conscious of this in the precincts of such a house as the Tiger, which I was given to understand is as respectable as the parish church, I do not know. But I have experienced a similar feeling in the yards of other provincial hotels that were also as correct as parish churches. We passed a dim fly, with its shafts slanting forlornly to the ground, and a wheelbarrow. Both looked as though they had been abandoned for ever. Then we came to the lamp, which illuminated a door, and on the door was a notice: "Private Bar. Billiards."

I am not a frequenter of convivial haunts. I should not dare to penetrate alone into a private bar; when I do enter a private bar it is invariably under the august protection of an *habitué,* and it is invariably with the idea that at last I am going to see life. Often has this illusion been shattered, but each time it perfectly renews itself. So I followed the bold Mr. Brindley into the private bar of the Tiger.

It was a small and low room. I instinctively stooped, though there was no necessity for me to stoop. The bar had no peculiarity. It can be described in a breath: Three perpendicular planes. Back plane, bottles arranged exactly like books on book-shelves; middle plane, the upper halves of two women dressed in tight black; front plane, a counter, dotted with glasses, and having strange areas of zinc. Reckon all that as the stage, and the rest of the room as auditorium. But the stage of a private bar is more mysterious than the stage of a theatre. You are closer to it, and yet it is far less approachable. The edge of the counter is more sacred than the footlights. Impossible to imagine yourself leaping over it. Impossible to imagine yourself in that cloistered place behind it. Impossible to imagine how the priestesses got themselves into that place, or that they ever leave it. They are always there; they are always the same. You may go into a theatre when it is empty and dark; but did you ever go into a private bar that was empty and dark? A private bar is as eternal as the hills, as changeless as the monomania of a madman, as mysterious as sorcery. Always the same order of bottles, the same tinkling, the same popping, the same time-tables, and the same realistic pictures of frothing champagne on the walls, the same advertisements on the same ash-trays on the counter, the same odour that wipes your face like a towel the instant you enter; and the same smiles, the same gestures, the same black fabric stretched to tension

over the same impressive mammiferous phenomena of the same inexplicable creatures who apparently never eat and never sleep, imprisoned for life in the hallowed and mystic hollow between the bottles and the zinc.

In a tone almost inaudible in its discretion, Mr. Brindley let fall to me as we went in —

"This is she."

She was not quite the ordinary barmaid. Nor, as I learnt afterwards, was she considered to be the ordinary barmaid. She was something midway in importance between the wife of the new proprietor and the younger woman who stood beside her in the cloister talking to a being that resembled a commercial traveller. It was the younger woman who was the ordinary barmaid; she had bright hair, and the bright vacant stupidity which, in my narrow experience, barmaids so often catch like an infectious disease from their clients. But Annie Brett was different. I can best explain how she impressed me by saying that she had the mien of a handsome married woman of forty with a coquettish and superficially emotional past, but also with a daughter who is just going into long skirts. I have known one or two such women. They have been beautiful; they are still handsome at a distance of twelve feet. They are rather effusive; they think they know life, when as a fact their instinctive repugnance for any form of truth has prevented them from acquiring even the rudiments of the knowledge of life. They are secretly preoccupied

by the burning question of obesity. They flatter, and they will pay any price for flattery. They are never sincere, not even with themselves; they never, during the whole of their existences, utter a sincere word, even in anger they coldly exaggerate. They are always frothing at the mouth with ecstasy. They adore everything, including God; go to church carrying a prayer-book and hymn-book in separate volumes, and absolutely fawn on the daughter. They are stylish — and impenetrable. But there is something about them very wistful and tragic.

In another social stratum, Miss Annie Brett might have been such a woman. Without doubt nature had intended her for the *rôle*. She was just a little ample, with broad shoulders and a large head and a lot of dark chestnut hair; a large mouth, and large teeth. She had earrings, a brooch, and several rings; also a neat originality of cuffs that would not have been permitted to an ordinary barmaid. As for her face, there were crow's-feet, and a mole (which had selected with infinite skill a site on her chin), and a general degeneracy of complexion; but it was an effective face. The little thing of twenty-three or so by her side had all the cruel advantages of youth, and was not ugly; but she was "killed" by Annie Brett. Miss Brett had a maternal bust. Indeed, something of the material resided in all of her that was visible above the zinc. She must have been about forty; that is to say, apparently older than the late Simon Fuge. Nevertheless, I could

conceive her, even now, speciously picturesque in a boat at midnight on a moonstruck water. Had she been on the stage she would have been looking forward to *ingénue* parts for another five years yet — such was her durable sort of effectiveness. Yes, she indubitably belonged to the ornamental half of the universe.

"So this is one of them!" I said to myself.

I tried to be philosophical; but at heart I was profoundly disappointed. I did not know what I had expected; but I had not expected *that*. I was well aware that a thing written always takes on a quality which does not justly appertain to it. I had not expected, therefore, to see an odalisque, a houri, an ideal toy or the remains of an ideal toy; I had not expected any kind of obvious brilliancy, nor a subtle charm that would haunt my memory for evermore. On the other hand, I had not expected the banal, the perfectly commonplace. And I think that Miss Annie Brett was the most banal person that it has pleased Fate to send into my life. I knew that instantly. She was a condemnation of Simon Fuge. *She,* one of the "wonderful creatures who had played so large a part" in the career of Simon Fuge! *Sapristi!* Still, she *was* one of the wonderful creatures, etc. She *had* floated o'er the bosom of the lake with a great artist. She *had* received his homage. She *had* stirred his feelings. She *had* shared with him the magic of the night. I might decry her as I would; she had known how to cast a spell over him — she and the other one! Some-

thing there was in her which had captured him and, seemingly, held him captive.

"Good-*evening,* Mr. Brindley," she expanded. "You're quite a stranger." And she embraced me also in the largeness of her welcome.

"It just happens," said Mr. Brindley, "that I was here last night. But you weren't."

"Were you now!" she exclaimed, as though learning a novel fact of the most passionate interest. "The truth is, I had to leave the bar to Miss Slaney last night. Mrs. Moorcroft was ill — and the baby only six weeks old, you know — and I wouldn't leave her. No, I wouldn't."

It was plain that in Miss Annie Brett's opinion there was only one really capable intelligence in the Tiger. This glimpse of her capability, this outleaping of the latent maternal in her, completely destroyed for the moment my vision of her afloat on the bosom of the lake.

"I see," said Mr. Brindley kindly. Then he turned to me with characteristic abruptness. "Well, give it a name, Mr. Loring."

Such is my simplicity that I did not immediately comprehend his meaning. For a fraction of a second I thought of the baby. Then I perceived that he was merely employing one of the sacred phrases, sanctified by centuries of usage, of the private bar. I had already drunk mercurey, green Chartreuse, and coffee. I had a violent desire not to drink anything more. I knew my deplorable tomorrows. Still, I would have drunk hot milk, cold

water, soda water or tea. Why should I not have had what I did not object to having? Herein lies another mystery of the private bar. One could surely order tea or milk or soda water from a woman who left everything to tend a mother with a six-weeks-old baby! But no. One could not. As Miss Annie Brett smiled at me pointedly, and rubbed her ringed hands, and kept on smiling with her terrific mechanical effusiveness, I lost all my self-control; I would have resigned myself to a hundred horrible to-morrows under the omnipotent, inexplicable influence of the private bar. I ejaculated, as though to the manner born —

"Irish."

It proved to have been rather clever of me, showing as it did a due regard for convention combined with a pretty idiosyncrasy. Mr. Brindley was clearly taken aback. The idea struck him as a new one. He reflected, and then enthusiastically exclaimed —

"Dashed if I don't have Irish too!"

And Miss Brett, delighted by this unexpected note of Irish in the long, long symphony of Scotch, charged our glasses with gusto. I sipped, death in my heart, and rakishness in my face and gesture. Mr. Brindley raised his glass respectfully to Miss Annie Brett, and I did the same. Those two were evidently good friends.

She led the conversation with hard, accustomed ease. When I say "hard" I do not in the least mean unsympathetic. But her sympathetic quality

was toughened by excessive usage, like the hand of a charwoman. She spoke of the vagaries of the Town Hall clock, the health of Mr. Brindley's children, the price of coal, the incidence of the annual wakes, the bankruptcy of the draper next door, and her own sciatica, all in the same tone of metallic tender solicitude. Mr. Brindley adopted an entirely serious attitude towards her. If I had met him there and nowhere else I should have taken him for a dignified mediocrity, little better than a fool, but with just enough discretion not to give himself away. I said nothing. I was shy. I always am shy in a bar. Out of her cold, cold roving eye Miss Brett watched me, trying to add me up and not succeeding. She must have perceived, however, that I was not like a fish in water.

There was a pause in the talk, due, I think, to Miss Annie Brett's preoccupation with what was going on between Miss Slaney, the ordinary barmaid, and her commercial traveller. The commercial traveller, if he was one, was reading something from a newspaper to Miss Slaney in an indistinct murmur, and with laughter in his voice.

"By the way," said Mr. Brindley, "you used to know Simon Fuge, didn't you?"

"Old Simon Fuge!" said Miss Brett. "Yes; after the brewery company took the Blue Bell at Cauldon over from him, I used to be there. He would come in sometimes. Such a nice queer old man!"

"I mean the son," said Mr. Brindley.

"Oh yes," she answered. "I knew young Mr. Simon too." A slight hesitation, and then: "Of course!" Another hesitation. "Why?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Brindley. "Only he's dead."

"You don't mean to say he's dead!" she exclaimed.

"Day before yesterday, in Italy," said Mr. Brindley ruthlessly.

Miss Annie Brett's manner certainly changed. It seemed almost to become natural and unecstatic.

"I suppose it will be in the papers?" she ventured.

"It's in the London paper."

"Well, I never!" she muttered.

"A long time, I should think, since he was in this part of the world," said Mr. Brindley. "When did *you* last see him?"

He was exceedingly skilful, I considered.

She put the back of her hand over her mouth, and bending her head slightly and lowering her eyelids, gazed reflectively at the counter.

"It was once when a lot of us went to Ilam," she answered quietly. "The St. Luke's lot, *you* know."

"Oh!" cried Mr. Brindley, apparently startled. "The St. Luke's lot?"

"Yes."

"How came he to go with you?"

"He didn't go with us. He was there — stopping there, I suppose."

"Why, I believe I remember hearing something

about that," said Mr. Brindley cunningly. "Didn't he take you out in a boat?"

A very faint dark crimson spread over the face of Miss Annie Brett. It could not be called a blush, but was as like a blush as was possible to her. The phenomenon, as I could see from his eyes, gave Mr. Brindley another shock.

"Yes," she replied. "Sally was there as well."

Then a silence, during which the commercial traveller could be heard reading from the newspaper.

"When was that?" gently asked Mr. Brindley.

"Don't ask *me* when it was, Mr. Brindley," she answered nervously. "It's ever so long ago. What did he die of?"

"Don't know."

Miss Annie Brett opened her mouth to speak, and did not speak. There were tears in her reddened eyes. I felt very awkward, and I think that Mr. Brindley also felt awkward. But I was glad. Those moist eyes caused me a thrill. There was after all some humanity in Miss Annie Brett. Yes, she had after all floated on the bosom of the lake with Simon Fuge. The least romantic of persons, she had yet felt romance. If she had touched Simon Fuge, Simon Fuge had touched her. She had memories. Once she had lived. I pictured her younger. I sought in her face the soft remains of youthfulness. I invented languishing poses for her in the boat. My imagination was equal to the task of seeing her as Simon Fuge saw her. I did so see her. I recalled Simon Fuge's excited description of the

long night in the boat, and I could reconstitute the night from end to end. And there the identical creature stood before me, the creature who had set fire to Simon Fuge, one of the "wonderful creatures" of the *Gazette,* ageing, hardened, banal, but momentarily restored to the empire of romance by those unshed, glittering tears. As an experience it was worth having.

She could not speak, and we did not. I heard the commercial traveller reading: "'The motion was therefore carried by twenty-five votes to nineteen, and the Countess of Chell promised that the whole question of the employment of barmaids should be raised at the next meeting of the B.W.T.S.' There! what do you think of that?"

Miss Annie Brett moved quickly towards the commercial traveller.

"I'll tell you what *I* think of it," she said, with ecstatic resentment. "I think it's just shameful! Why should the Countess of Chell want to rob a lot of respectable young ladies of their living? I can tell you they're just as respectable as the Countess of Chell is — yes, and perhaps more, by all accounts. I think people do well to call her 'Interfering Iris.' When she's robbed them of their living, what does she expect them to do? Is she going to keep them? Then what does she expect them to do?"

The commercial traveller was inept enough to offer a jocular reply, and then he found himself involved in the morass of "the whole question." He, and we also, were obliged to hear in immense detail

Miss Annie Brett's complete notions of the movement for the abolition of barmaids. The subject was heavy on her mind, and she lifted it off. Simon Fuge was relinquished; he dropped like a stone into the pool of forgetfulness. And yet, strange as it seems, she was assuredly not sincere in the expression of her views on the question of barmaids. She held no real views. She merely persuaded herself that she held them. When the commercial traveller, who was devoid of sense, pointed out that it was not proposed to rob anybody of a livelihood, and that existent barmaids would be permitted to grace the counters of their adoption, she grew frostily vicious. The commercial traveller decided to retire and play billiards. Mr. Brindley and I in our turn departed. I was extremely disappointed by this sequel.

"Ah!" breathed Mr. Brindley when we were outside, in front of the Town Hall. "She was quite right about that clock."

After that we turned silently into a long illuminated street which rose gently. The boxes of light were flashing up and down it, but otherwise it seemed to be quite deserted. Mr. Brindley filled a pipe and lit it as he walked. The way in which that man kept the match alight in a fresh breeze made me envious. I could conceive myself rivalling his exploits in cigarette-making, the purchase of rare books, the interpretation of music, even (for a wager) the drinking of beer, but I knew that I should never be able to keep a match alight in the breeze. He threw the match into the mud, and in the mud it continued

miraculously to burn with a large flame, as though still under his magic dominion. There are some things that baffle the reasoning faculty.

"Well," I said, "she must have been a pretty woman once."

"'Pretty,' by God!" he replied, "she was beautiful. She was considered the finest piece in Hanbridge at one time. And let me tell you we're supposed to have more than our share of good looks in the Five Towns."

"What — the women, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And she never married?"

"No."

"Nor — anything?"

"Oh, no," he said carelessly.

"But you don't mean to tell me she's never ——" I was just going to exclaim, but I did not, I said: "And it's her sister who is Mrs. Colclough?"

"Yes." He seemed to be either meditative or disinclined to talk. However, my friends have sometimes hinted to me that when my curiosity is really aroused, I am capable of indiscretions.

"So one sister rattles about in an expensive motor-car, and the other serves behind a bar!" I observed.

He glanced at me.

"I expect it's a bit difficult for you to understand," he answered; "but you must remember you're in a democratic district. You told me once you knew Exeter. Well, this isn't a cathedral town. It's about a century in front of any cathedral town in the

world. Why, my good sir, there's practically no such thing as class distinction here. Both my grandfathers were working potters. Colclough's father was a joiner who finished up as a builder. If Colclough makes money and chooses to go to Paris and get the best motor-car he can, why in Hades shouldn't his wife ride in it? If he is fond of music and can play like the devil, that isn't his sister-in-law's fault, is it? His wife was a dressmaker, at least she was a dressmaker's assistant. If she suits him, what's the matter?"

"But I never suggested ——"

"Excuse me," he stopped me, speaking with careful and slightly exaggerated calmness, "I think you did. If the difference in the situations of the two sisters didn't strike you as very extraordinary, what did you mean?"

"And isn't it extraordinary?" I demanded.

"It wouldn't be considered so in any reasonable society," he insisted. "The fact is, my good sir, you haven't yet quite got rid of Exeter. I do believe this place will do you good. Why, damn it! Colclough didn't marry both sisters. You think he might keep the other sister? Well, he might. But suppose his wife had half-a-dozen sisters, should he keep them all! I can tell you we're just like the rest of the world, we find no difficulty whatever in spending all the money we make. I dare say Colclough would be ready enough to keep his sister-in-law. I've never asked him. But I'm perfectly certain that his sister-in-law wouldn't be kept. Not much!

You don't know these women down here, my good sir. She's earned her living at one thing or another all her life, and I reckon she'll keep on earning it till she drops. She is, without exception, the most exasperating female I ever came across, and that's saying something; but I will give her *that* credit: she's mighty independent."

"How exasperating?" I asked, surprised to hear this from him.

"*I* don't know. But she is. If she was my wife I should kill her one night. Don't you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I quite agree with you," I said. "But you seemed to be awfully good friends with her."

"No use being anything else. No woman that it ever pleased Providence to construct is going to frighten me away from the draught Burton that you can get at the Tiger. Besides, she can't help it. She was born like that."

"She *talks* quite ordinarily," I remarked.

"Oh! It isn't what she says, particularly. It's *her*. Either you like her or you don't like her. Now Colclough thinks she's all right. In fact, he admires her."

"There's one thing," I said, "she jolly near cried to-night."

"Purely mechanical!" said Mr. Brindley with cruel curtness.

What seemed to me singular was that the relations which had existed between Miss Annie Brett and

Simon Fuge appeared to have no interest whatever for Mr. Brindley. He had not even referred to them.

"You were just beginning to draw her out," I ventured.

"No," he replied. "I thought I'd just see what she'd say. No one ever did draw that woman out."

I had completely lost my vision of her in the boat, but somehow that declaration of his, "no one ever did draw that woman out," partially restored the vision to me. It seemed to invest her with agreeable mystery.

"And the other sister — Mrs. Colclough?" I questioned.

"I'm taking you to see her as fast as I can," he answered. His tone implied further: "I've just humoured one of your whims, now for the other."

"But tell me something about her."

"She's the best bridge-player — woman, that is — in Bursley. But she will only play every other night for fear the habit should get hold of her. There you've got her."

"Younger than Miss Brett?"

"Younger," said Mr. Brindley.

"She isn't the same sort of person, is she?"

"She is not," said Mr. Brindley. And his tone implied: "Thank God for it!"

Very soon afterwards, on the top of a hill, he drew me into the garden of a large house which stood back from the road.

VII

It was quite a different sort of house from Mr. Brindley's. One felt that immediately on entering the hall, which was extensive. There was far more money and considerably less taste at large in that house than in the other. I noticed carved furniture that must have been bought with a coarse and a generous hand; and on the walls a diptych by Marcus Stone portraying the course of true love clingingly draped. It was just like Exeter or Onslow Square. But the middle-aged servant who received us struck at once the same note as had sounded so agreeably at Mr. Brindley's. She seemed positively glad to see us; our arrival seemed to afford her a peculiar and violent pleasure, as though the hospitality which we were about to accept was in some degree hers too. She robbed us of our hats with ecstasy.

Then Mr. Colclough appeared.

"Delighted you've come, Mr. Loring!" he said, shaking my hand again. He said it with fervour. He obviously was delighted. The exercise of hospitality was clearly the chief joy of his life; at least, if he had a greater it must have been something where keenness was excessive beyond the point of pleasure, as some joys are. "How do, Bob? Your missis has just come." He was still in his motoring clothes.

Mr. Brindley, observing my gaze transiently on the Marcus Stones, said: "I know what you're looking for; you're looking for Sant's 'Soul's Awak-

ening.' We don't keep it in the window; you'll see it inside."

"Bob's always rotting me about my pictures," Mr. Colclough smiled indulgently. He seemed big enough to eat his friend, and his rich, heavy voice rolled like thunder about the hall. "Come along in, will you?"

"Half-a-second, Ol," Mr. Brindley called in a conspiratorial tone, and, turning to me: "Tell him *the* limerick. You know."

"The one about the hayrick?"

Mr. Brindley nodded.

There were three heads close together for a space of twenty seconds or so, and then a fearful explosion happened — the unique, tremendous laughter of Mr. Colclough, which went off like a charge of melinite and staggered the furniture.

"Now, now!" a feminine voice protested from an unseen interior.

I was taken to the drawing-room, an immense apartment with an immense piano black as midnight in it. At the further end two women were seated close together in conversation, and I distinctly heard the name "Fuge." One of them was Mrs. Brindley, in a hat. The other, a very big and stout woman, in an elaborate crimson garment that resembled a teagown, rose and came to meet me with extended hand.

"My wife — Mr. Loring," said Mr. Oliver Colclough.

"So glad to meet you," she said, beaming on me

with all her husband's pleasure. "Come and sit between Mrs. Brindley and me, near the window, and keep us in order. Don't you find it very close? There are at least a hundred cats in the garden."

One instantly perceived that ceremonial stiffness could not exist in the same atmosphere with Mrs. Oliver Colclough. During the whole time I spent in her house there was never the slightest pause in the conversation. Mrs. Oliver Colclough prevented nobody from talking, but she would gladly use up every odd remnant of time that was not employed by others. No scrap was too small for her.

"So this is the other one!" I said to myself. "Well, give me this one!"

Certainly there was a resemblance between the two, in the general formation of the face, and the shape of the shoulders; but it is astonishing that two sisters can differ as these did, with a profound and vital difference. In Mrs. Colclough there was no *coquetterie,* no trace of that more-than-half suspicious challenge to a man that one feels always in the type to which her sister belonged. The notorious battle of the sexes was assuredly carried on by her in a spirit of frank muscular gaiety — she could, I am sure, do her share of fighting. Put her in a boat on the bosom of the lake under starlight, and she would not by a gesture, a tone, a glance, convey mysterious nothings to you, a male. She would not be subtly changed by the sensuous influences of the situation; she would always be the same plump and earthly piece of candour. Even if she were in love

with you, she would not convey mysterious nothings in such circumstances. If she were in love with you she would most clearly convey unmysterious and solid somethings. I was convinced that the contributing cause to the presence of the late Simon Fuge in the boat on Ilam Lake on the historic night was Annie the superior barmaid, and not Sally of the automobile. But Mrs. Colclough, if not beautiful, was a very agreeable creation. Her amplitude gave at first sight an exaggerated impression of her age; but this departed after more careful inspection. She could not have been more than thirty. She was very dark, with plenteous and untidy black hair, thick eyebrows, and a slight moustache. Her eyes were very vivacious, and her gestures, despite that bulk, quick and graceful. She was happy; her ideals were satisfied; it was probably happiness that had made her stout. Her massiveness was apparently no grief to her; she had fallen into the carelessness which is too often the pitfall of women who, being stout, are content.

"How do, missis?" Mr. Brindley greeted her, and to his wife, "How do, missis? But, look here, bright star, this gadding about is all very well, but what about those precious kids of yours? None of 'em dead yet, I hope."

"Don't be silly, Bob."

"I've been over to your house," Mrs. Colclough put in. "Of course it isn't mumps. The child's as right as rain. So I brought Mary back with me."

"Well," said Mr. Brindley, "for a woman who's

never had any children your knowledge of children beggars description. What you aren't sure you know about them isn't knowledge. However ——"

"Listen," Mrs. Colclough replied, with a delightful throwing-down of the glove. "I'll bet you a level sovereign that child hasn't got the mumps. So there! And Oliver will guarantee to pay you."

"Ay!" said Mr. Colclough; "I'll back my wife any day."

"Don't bet, Bob," Mrs. Brindley enjoined her husband excitedly in her high treble.

"I won't," said Mr. Brindley.

"Now let's sit down." Mrs. Colclough addressed me with particular, confidential grace.

We three exactly filled the sofa. I have often sat between two women, but never with such calm, unreserved, unapprehensive comfortableness as I experienced between Mrs. Colclough and Mrs. Brindley. It was just as if I had known them for years.

"You'll make a mess of that, Ol," said Mr. Brindley.

The other two men were at some distance, in front of a table, on which were two champagne bottles and five glasses, and a plate of cakes. "Well," I said to myself, "I'm not going to have any champagne, anyhow. Mercurey! Green Chartreuse! Irish whisky! And then champagne! And a morning's hard work to-morrow! No!"

Plop! A cork flew up and bounced against the ceiling.

Mr. Colclough carefully emptied the bottle into

the glasses, of which Mr. Brindley seized two and advanced with one in either hand for the women. It was the host who offered a glass to me.

"No, thanks very much, I really can't," I said in a very firm tone.

My tone was so firm that it startled them. They glanced at each other with alarmed eyes, like simple people confronted by an inexplicable phenomenon.

"But look here, mister!" said Mr. Colclough, pained, "we've got this out specially for you. You don't suppose this is our usual tipple, do you?"

I yielded. I could do no less than sacrifice myself to their enchanting instinctive kindness of heart. "I shall be dead to-morrow," I said to myself; "but I shall have lived to-night." They were relieved, but I saw that I had given them a shock from which they could not instantaneously recover. Therefore I began with a long pull, to reassure them.

"Mrs. Brindley has been telling me that Simon Fuge is dead," said Mrs. Colclough brightly, as though Mrs. Brindley had been telling her that the price of mutton had gone down.

I perceived that those two had been talking over Simon Fuge, after their fashion.

"Oh, yes," I responded.

"Have you got that newspaper in your pocket, Mr. Loring?" asked Mrs. Brindley.

I had.

"No," I said, feeling in my pockets; "I must have left it at your house."

"Well," she said, "that's strange. I looked for

it to show it to Mrs. Colclough, but I couldn't see it."

This was not surprising. I did not want Mrs. Colclough to read the journalistic obituary until she had given me her own obituary of Fuge.

"It must be somewhere about," I said; and to Mrs. Colclough: "I suppose you knew him pretty well?"

"Oh, bless you, no! I only met him once."

"At Ilam?"

"Yes. What are you going to do, Oliver?"

Her husband was opening the piano.

"Bob and I are just going to have another smack at that Brahms."

"You don't expect us to listen, do you?"

"I expect you to do what pleases you, missis," said he. "I should be a bigger fool than I am if I expected anything else." Then he smiled at me. "No! just go on talking. Ol and I'll drown you easy enough. Quite short! Back in five minutes."

The two men placed each his wine-glass on the space on the piano designed for a candlestick, lighted cigars, and sat down to play.

"Yes," Mrs. Colclough resumed, in a lower, more confidential tone, to the accompaniment of the music. "You see there was a whole party of us there, and Mr. Fuge was staying at the hotel, and of course he knew several of us."

"And he took you out in a boat?"

"Me and Annie? Yes. Just as it was getting dusk he came up to us and asked us if we'd go for

a row. Eh, I can hear him asking us now! I asked him if he could row, and he was quite angry. So we went, to quieten him." She paused, and then laughed.

"Sally!" Mrs. Brindley protested. "You know he's dead!"

"Yes." She admitted the rightness of the protest. "But I can't help it. I was just thinking how he got his feet wet in pushing the boat off." She laughed again. "When we were safely off, some one came down to the shore and shouted to Mr. Fuge to bring the boat back. You know his quick way of talking." (Here she began to imitate Fuge.) "'I've quarrelled with the man this boat belongs to. Awful feud! Fact is, I'm in a hostile country here!' And a lot more like that. It seemed he had quarrelled with everybody in Ilam. He wasn't sure if the landlord of the hotel would let him sleep there again. He told us all about his quarrels, until he dropped one of the oars. I shall never forget how funny he looked in the moonlight when he dropped the oar. 'There, that's your fault!' he said. 'You make me talk too much about myself, and I get excited.' He kept striking matches to look for the oar, and turning the boat round and round with the other oar. 'Last match!' he said. 'We shall never see land tonight.' Then he found the oar again. He considered we were saved. Then he began to tell us about his aunt. 'You know I'd no business to be here. I came down from London for my aunt's funeral,

and here I am in a boat at night with two pretty girls!' He said the funeral had taught him one thing, and that was that black neckties were the only possible sort of necktie. He said the greatest worry of his life had always been neckties; but he wouldn't have to worry any more, and so his aunt hadn't died for nothing. I assure you he kept on talking about neckties. I assure you, Mr. Loring, I went to sleep — at least I dozed — and when I woke up he was still talking about neckties. But then his feet began to get cold. I suppose it was because they were wet. The way he grumbled about his feet being cold! I remember he turned his coat collar up. He wanted to get on shore and walk, but he'd taken us a long way up the lake by that time and he saw we were absolutely lost. So he put the oars in the boat and stood up and stamped his feet. It might have upset the boat."

"How did it end?" I enquired.

"Well, Annie and I caught the train, but only just. You see it was a special train, so they kept it for us, otherwise we should have been in a nice fix."

"So you have special trains in these parts?"

"Why, of course! It was the annual outing of the teachers of St. Luke's Sunday School and their friends, you see. So we had a special train."

At this point the duettists came to the end of a movement, and Mr. Brindley leaned over to us from his stool, glass in hand.

"The railway company practically owns Ilam,"

he explained, "and so they run it for all they're worth. They made the lake, to feed the canals, when they bought the canals from the canal company. It's an artificial lake, and the railway runs alongside it. A very good scheme of the company's. They started out to make Ilam a popular resort, and they've made it a popular resort, what with special trains and things. But try to get a special train to any other place on their rotten system, and you'll soon see!"

"How big is the lake?" I asked.

"How long is it, Ol?" he demanded of Colclough. "A couple of miles?"

"Not it! About a mile. Adagio!"

They proceeded with Brahms.

"He ran with you all the way to the station, didn't he?" Mrs. Brindley suggested to Mrs. Colclough.

"I should just say he did!" Mrs. Colclough concurred. "He wanted to get warm, and then he was awfully afraid lest we should miss it."

"I thought you were on the lake practically all night!" I exclaimed.

"All night! Well, I don't know what you call all night. But I was back in Bursley before eleven o'clock, I'm sure."

I then contrived to discover the *Gazette* in an unsearched pocket, and I gave it to Mrs. Colclough to read. Mrs. Brindley looked over her shoulder.

There was no slightest movement of deprecation on Mrs. Colclough's part. She amiably smiled as

she perused the *Gazette's* version of Fuge's version of the lake episode. Here was the attitude of the woman whose soul is like crystal. It seems to me that most women would have blushed, or dissented, or simulated anger, or failed to conceal vanity. But Mrs. Colclough might have been reading a fairy tale, for any emotion she displayed.

"Yes," she said blandly; "from the things Annie used to tell me about him sometimes, I should say that was just how he *would* talk. They seem to have thought quite a lot of him in London, then?"

"Oh, rather!" I said. "I suppose your sister knew him pretty well?"

"Annie? I don't know. She knew him."

I distinctly observed a certain self-consciousness in Mrs. Colclough as she made this reply. Mrs. Brindley had risen, and with wifely attentiveness was turning over the music pages for her husband.

VIII

Soon afterwards, for me, the night began to grow fantastic; it took on the colour of a gigantic adventure. I do not suppose that either Mr. Brindley or Mr. Colclough, or the other person who presently arrived, regarded it as anything but a pleasant conviviality, but to a man of my constitution and habits it was an almost incredible occurrence. The other person was the book-collecting doctor. He arrived with a discreet tap on the window at midnight, to spend the evening. Mrs. Brindley had gone home

and Mrs. Colclough had gone to bed. The book-collecting doctor refused champagne; he was, in fact, very rude to champagne in general. He had whisky. And those astonishing individuals, Messieurs Brindley and Colclough, secretly convinced of the justice of the attack on champagne, had whisky too. And that still more astonishing individual, Loring of the B. M., joined them. It was the hour of limericks. Limericks were demanded for the diversion of the doctor, and I furnished them. We then listened to the tale of the doctor's experiences that day amid the sturdy, natural-minded population of a mining village not far from Bursley. Seldom have I had such a bath in the pure fluid of human nature. All sense of time was lost. I lived in an eternity. I could not suggest to my host that we should depart. I could, however, decline more whisky. And I could, given the chance, discourse with gay despair concerning the miserable wreck that I should be on the morrow in consequence of this high living. I asked them how I could be expected, in such a state, to judge delicate points of expertise in earthenware. I gave them a brief sketch of my customary evening, and left them to compare it with that evening. The doctor perceived that I was serious. He gazed at me with pity, as if to say: "Poor frail southern organism! It ought to be in bed, with nothing inside it but tea!" What he did actually say was: "You come round to my place, I'll soon put you right!" "Can you stop me from having a headache to-morrow?" I eagerly

asked. "I think so," he said with calm northern confidence.

At some later hour Mr. Brindley and I "went round." Mr. Colclough would not come. He bade me good-bye, as his wife had done, with the most extraordinary kindness, the most genuine sorrow at quitting me, the most genuine pleasure in the hope of seeing me again.

"There are three thousand books in this room!" I said to myself, as I stood in the doctor's electrically lit library.

"What price this for a dog?" Mr. Brindley drew my attention to an aristocratic fox-terrier that lay on the hearth. "Well, Titus! Is it sleepy? Well, well! How many firsts has he won, doctor?"

"Six," said the doctor. "I'll just fix you up, to begin with," he turned to me.

After I had been duly fixed up ("This'll help you to sleep, and *this'll* placate your 'god,'" said the doctor), I saw to my intense surprise that another "evening" was to be instantly superimposed on the "evening" at Mr. Colclough's. The doctor and Mr. Brindley carefully and deliberately lighted long cigars, and sank deeply into immense arm-chairs; and so I imitated them as well as I could in my feeble southern way. We talked books. We just simply enumerated books without end, praising or damning them, and arranged authors in neat pews, like cattle in classes at an agricultural show. No pastime is more agreeable to people who have the

book disease, and none more quickly fleets the hours, and none is more delightfully futile.

Ages elapsed, and suddenly, like a gun discharging, Mr. Brindley said —

"We must go!"

Of all the things that happened this was the most astonishing.

We did go.

"By the way, doc.," said Mr. Brindley, in the doctor's wide porch, "I forgot to tell you that Simon Fuge is dead."

"Is he?" said the doctor.

"Yes. You've got a couple of his etchings, haven't you?"

"No," said the doctor. "I had. But I sold them several months ago."

"Oh!" said Mr. Brindley negligently; "I didn't know. Well, so long!"

We had a few hundred yards to walk down the silent, wide street, where the gas-lamps were burning with the strange, endless patience that gas-lamps have. The stillness of a provincial town at night is quite different from that of London, we might have been the only persons alive in England.

Except for a feeling of unreality, a feeling that the natural order of things had been disturbed by some necromancer, I was perfectly well the same morning at breakfast, as the doctor had predicted I should be. When I expressed to Mr. Brindley my stupefaction at this happy sequel, he showed a polite but careless inability to follow my line of

thought. It appeared that he was always well at breakfast, even when he did stay up "a little later than usual." It appeared further that he always breakfasted at a quarter to nine, and read the *Manchester Guardian* during the meal, to which his wife did or did not descend — according to the moods of the nursery; and that he reached his office at a quarter to ten. That morning the mood of the nursery was apparently unpropitious. He and I were alone. I begged him not to pretermit his *Guardian,* but to examine it and give me the news. He agreed, scarcely unwilling.

"There's a paragraph in the London correspondence about Fuge," he announced from behind the paper.

"What do they say about him?"

"Nothing particular."

"Now I want to ask you something," I said.

I had been thinking a good deal about the sisters and Simon Fuge. And in spite of everything that I had heard — in spite even of the facts that the lake had been dug by a railway company, and that the excursion to the lake had been an excursion of Sunday-school teachers and their friends — I was still haunted by certain notions concerning Simon Fuge and Annie Brett. Annie Brett's flush, her unshed tears; and the self-consciousness shown by Mrs. Colclough when I had pointedly mentioned her sister's name in connection with Simon Fuge's: these were surely indications! And then the doctor's recitals of manners in the immediate neighbourhood of Burs-

ley went to support my theory that even in Staffordshire life was very much life.

"What?" demanded Mr. Brindley.

"Was Miss Brett ever Simon Fuge's mistress?"

At that moment Mrs. Brindley, miraculously fresh and smiling, entered the room.

"Wife," said Mr. Brindley, without giving her time to greet me, "what do you think he's just asked me?"

"*I* don't know."

"He's just asked me if Annie Brett was ever Simon Fuge's mistress."

She sank into a chair.

"Annie *Brett?*" She began to laugh gently. "Oh! Mr. Loring, you really are too funny!" She yielded to her emotions. It may be said that she laughed as they can laugh in the Five Towns. She cried. She had to wipe away the tears of laughter.

"What on earth made you think so?" she enquired, after recovery.

"I — had an idea," I said lamely. "He always made out that one of those two sisters was so much to him, and I knew it couldn't be Mrs. Colclough."

"Well," she said, "ask anybody down here, *any*body! And see what they'll say."

"No," Mr. Brindley put in, "don't go about asking *any*body. You might get yourself disliked. But you may take it it isn't true."

"Most certainly," his wife concurred with seriousness.

"We reckon to know something about Simon Fuge down here," Mr. Brindley added. "Also about the famous Annie."

"He must have flirted with her a good bit, anyhow," I said.

"Oh, *flirt!*" ejaculated Mr. Brindley.

I had a sudden dazzling vision of the great truth that the people of the Five Towns have no particular use for half-measures in any department of life. So I accepted the final judgment with meekness.

IX

I returned to London that evening, my work done, and the municipality happily flattered by my judgment of the slip-decorated dishes. Mr. Brindley had found time to meet me at the midday meal, and he had left his office earlier than usual in order to help me to drink his wife's afternoon tea. About an hour later he picked up my little bag, and said that he should accompany me to the little station in the midst of the desert of cinders and broken crockery, and even see me as far as Knype, where I had to take the London express. No, there are no half-measures in the Five Towns. Mrs. Brindley stood on her doorstep, with her eldest infant on her shoulder, and waved us off. The infant cried, expressing his own and his mother's grief at losing a guest. It seems as if people are born hospitable in the Five Towns.

We had not walked more than a hundred yards

up the road when a motor-car thundered down upon us from the opposite direction. It was Mr. Colclough's, and Mr. Colclough was driving it. Mr. Brindley stopped his friend with the authoritative gesture of a policeman.

"Where are you going, Ol?"

"Home, lad. Sorry you're leaving us so soon, Mr. Loring."

"You're mistaken, my boy," said Mr. Brindley. "You're just going to run us down to Knype station, first."

"I must look slippy, then," said Mr. Colclough.

"You can look as slippy as you like," said Mr. Brindley.

In another fifteen seconds we were in the car, and it had turned round, and was speeding towards Knype. A feverish journey! We passed electric cars every minute, and for three miles were continually twisting round the tails of ponderous, creaking and excessively deliberate carts that dropped a trail of small coal, or huge barrels on wheels that dripped something like the finest Devonshire cream, or brewer's drays that left nothing behind them save a luscious odour of malt. It was a breathless slither over unctuous black mud through a long winding cañon of brown-red houses and shops, with a glimpse here and there of a grey-green park, a canal, or a football field.

"I daredn't hurry," said Mr. Colclough, setting us down at the station, "I was afraid of a skid." He had not spoken during the transit.

"Don't put on side, Ol," said Mr. Brindley. "What time did you get up this morning?"

"Eight o'clock, lad. I was at th' works at nine."

He flew off to escape my thanks, and Mr. Brindley and I went into the station. Owing to the celerity of the automobile we had half-an-hour to wait. We spent it chiefly at the bookstall. While we were there the extra-special edition of the *Staffordshire Signal,* affectionately termed "the local rag" by its readers, arrived, and we watched a newsboy affix its poster to a board. The poster ran thus:

HANBRIDGE RATES
LIVELY MEETING

KNYPE F.C.
NEW CENTRE-FORWARD

ALL WINNERS AND S.P.

Now, close by this poster was the poster of the *Daily Telegraph,* and among the items offered by the *Daily Telegraph* was: "Death of Simon Fuge." I could not forbear pointing out to Mr. Brindley the difference between the two posters. A conversation ensued; and amid the rumbling of trains and the rough stir of the platform we got back again to Simon Fuge, and Mr. Brindley's tone gradually grew, if not acrid, a little impatient.

"After all," he said, "rates are rates, especially in Hanbridge. And let me tell you that last season

Knype Football Club jolly nearly got thrown out of the First League. The constitution of the team for this next season — why, damn it, it's a question of national importance! You don't understand these things. If Knype Football Club was put into the League Second Division, ten thousand homes would go into mourning. Who the devil was Simon Fuge?"

They joke with such extraordinary seriousness in the Five Towns that one is somehow bound to pretend that they are not joking. So I replied —

"He was a great artist. And this is his native district. Surely you ought to be proud of him!"

"He may have been a great artist," said Mr. Brindley, "or he may not. But for us he was simply a man who came of a family that had a bad reputation for talking too much and acting the goat!"

"Well," I said, "we shall see — in fifty years."

"That's just what we shan't," said he. "We shall be where Simon Fuge is — dead! However, perhaps we are proud of him. But you don't expect us to show it, do you? That's not our style."

He performed the quasi-winking phenomenon with his eyes. It was his final exhibition of it to me.

"A strange place!" I reflected, as I ate my dinner in the dining-car, with the pressure of Mr. Brindley's steely clasp still affecting my right hand, and the rich, honest cordiality of his *au revoir* in my heart. "A place that is passing strange!"

And I thought further: He may have been a boaster, and a chatterer, and a man who suffered from cold feet at the wrong moments! And the Five Towns may have got the better of him, now. But that portrait of the little girl in the Wedgwood Institution is waiting there, right in the middle of the Five Towns. And one day the Five Towns will have to "give it best." They can say what they like! . . . What eyes the fellow had, when he was in the right company!

THE MATADOR OF THE FIVE TOWNS

I

MRS. BRINDLEY looked across the lunch-table at her husband with glinting, eager eyes, which showed that there was something unusual in the brain behind them.

"Bob," she said, factitiously calm. "You don't know what I've just remembered!"

"Well?" said he.

"It's only grandma's birthday to-day!"

My friend Robert Brindley, the architect, struck the table with a violent fist, making his little boys blink, and then he said quietly:

"*The* deuce!"

I gathered that grandmamma's birthday had been forgotten and that it was not a festival that could be neglected with impunity. Both Mr. and Mrs. Brindley had evidently a humorous appreciation of crises, contretemps, and those collisions of circumstances which are usually called "junctures" for short. I could have imagined either of them saying to the other: "Here's a funny thing! The house is on fire!" And then yielding to laughter as they ran for buckets. Mrs. Brindley, in particular, laughed now; she gazed at the table-cloth and

laughed almost silently to herself; though it appeared that their joint forgetfulness might result in temporary estrangement from a venerable ancestor who was also, birthdays being duly observed, a continual fount of rich presents in specie.

Robert Brindley drew a time-table from his breast-pocket with the rapid gesture of habit. All men of business in the Five Towns seem to carry that time-table in their breast-pockets. Then he examined his watch carefully.

"You'll have time to dress up your progeny and catch the 2:05. It makes the connection at Knype for Axe."

The two little boys, aged perhaps four and six, who had been ladling the messy contents of specially deep plates on to their bibs, dropped their spoons and began to babble about gray-granny, and one of them insisted several times that he must wear his new gaiters.

"Yes," said Mrs. Brindley to her husband, after reflection. "And a fine old crowd there'll be in the train — with this foot-ball match!"

"Can't be helped! . . . Now you kids, hook it upstairs to nurse."

"And what about you?" asked Mrs. Brindley.

"You must tell the old lady I'm kept by business."

"I told her that last year, and you know what happened."

"Well," said Brindley. "Here Loring's just come. You don't expect me to leave him, do you?

Or have you had the beautiful idea of taking him over to Axe to pass a pleasant Saturday afternoon with your esteemed grandmother?"

"No," said Mrs. Brindley. "Hardly that!"

"Well, then?"

The boys, having first revolved on their axes, slid down from their high chairs as though from horses.

"Look here," I said. "You mustn't mind me. I shall be all right."

"Ha-ha!" shouted Brindley. "I seem to see you turned loose alone in this amusing town on a winter afternoon. I seem to see you!"

"I could stop in and read," I said, eyeing the multitudinous books on every wall of the dining-room. The house was dadoed throughout with books.

"Rot!" said Brindley.

This was only my third visit to his home and to the Five Towns, but he and I had already become curiously intimate. My first two visits had been occasioned by official pilgrimages as a British Museum expert in ceramics. The third was for a purely friendly week-end, and had no pretext. The fact is, I was drawn to the astonishing district and its astonishing inhabitants. The Five Towns, to me, was like the East to those who have smelt the East: it "called."

"I'll tell you what we *could* do," said Mrs. Brindley. "We could put him on to Dr. Stirling."

"So we could!" Brindley agreed. "Wife, this is one of your bright, intelligent days. We'll put

you on to the doctor, Loring. I'll impress on him that he must keep you constantly amused till I get back, which I fear it won't be early. This is what we call manners, you know,— to invite a fellow creature to travel a hundred and fifty miles to spend two days here, and then to turn him out before he's been in the house an hour. It's *us,* that is! But the truth of the matter is, the birthday business might be a bit serious. It might easily cost me fifty quid and no end of diplomacy. If you were a married man you'd know that the ten plagues of Egypt are simply nothing in comparison with your wife's relations. And she's over eighty, the old lady."

"*I'll* give you ten plagues of Egypt!" Mrs. Brindley menaced her spouse, as she wafted the boys from the room. "Mr. Loring, do take some more of that cheese if you fancy it." She vanished.

Within ten minutes Brindley was conducting me to the doctor's, whose house was on the way to the station. In its spacious porch, he explained the circumstances in six words, depositing me like a parcel. The doctor, who had once by mysterious medicaments saved my frail organism from the consequences of one of Brindley's Falstaffian "nights," hospitably protested his readiness to sacrifice patients to my pleasure.

"It'll be a chance for MacIlroy," said he.

"Who's MacIlroy?" I asked.

"MacIlroy is another Scotchman," growled Brindley. "Extraordinary how they stick together!

When he wanted an assistant, do you suppose he looked about for some one in the district, some one who understood us and loved us and could take a hand at bridge? Not he! Off he goes to Cupar, or somewhere, and comes back with another stage Scotchman, named MacIlroy. Now listen here, Doc! A charge to keep you have, and mind you keep it, or I'll never pay your confounded bill. We'll knock on the window to-night as we come back. In the meantime you can show Loring your etchings, and pray for me." And to me: "Here's a latchkey." With no further ceremony, he hurried away to join his wife and children at Bleakridge Station. In such singular manner was I transferred forcibly from host to host.

II

The doctor and I resembled each other in this: that there was no offensive affability about either of us. Though abounding in good nature, we could not become intimate by a sudden act of volition. Our conversation was difficult, unnatural, and by gusts falsely familiar. He displayed to me his bachelor house, his etchings, a few specimens of modern *rouge flambé* ware made at Knype, his whisky, his celebrated prize-winning fox-terrier Titus, the largest collection of books in the Five Towns, and photographs of Marischal College, Aberdeen. Then we fell flat, socially prone. Sitting in his study, with Titus between us on the hearthrug, we knew no more what to say or do.

I regretted that Brindley's wife's grandmother should have been born on a fifteenth of February. Brindley was a vivacious talker, he could be trusted to talk. I, too, am a good talker — with another good talker. With a bad talker I am just a little worse than he is. The doctor said abruptly after a nerve-trying silence that he had forgotten a most important call at Hanbridge, and would I care to go with him in the car? I was and still am convinced that he was simply inventing. He wanted to break the sinister spell by getting out of the house, and he had not the face to suggest a sortie into the streets of the Five Towns as a promenade of pleasure.

So we went forth, splashing warily through the rich mud and the dank mist of Trafalgar Road, past all those strange little Indian-red houses, and ragged empty spaces, and poster-hoardings, and rounded kilns, and high smoking chimneys, up hill, down hill, and up hill again, encountering and overtaking many electric trams that dipped and rose like ships at sea, into Crown Square, the centre of Hanbridge, the metropolis of the Five Towns. And while the doctor paid his mysterious call, I stared around me at the large shops and the banks and the gilded hotels. Down the radiating street-vistas I could make out the façades of halls, theatres, chapels. Trams rumbled continually in and out of the square. They seemed to enter casually, to hesitate a few moments as if at a loss, and then to decide with a nonchalant clang of bells that they might as well go off some-

where else in search of something more interesting. They were rather like human beings who are condemned to live for ever in a place of which they are sick beyond the expressiveness of words.

And indeed the influence of Crown Square, with its large effects of terra cotta, plate glass, and gold letters, all under a heavy skyscape of drab smoke, was depressing. A few very seedy men (sharply contrasting with the fine delicacy of costly things behind plate-glass) stood doggedly here and there in the mud, immobilised by the gloomy enchantment of the square. Two of them turned to look at Stirling's motor-car and me. They gazed fixedly for a long time, and then one said, only his lips moving:

"Has Tommy stood thee that there quart o' beer as he promised thee?"

No reply, no response of any sort, for a further long period! Then the other said, with grim resignation:

"Ay!"

The conversation ceased, having made a little oasis in the dismal desert of their silent scrutiny of the car. Except for an occasional stamp of the foot they never moved. They just doggedly and indifferently stood, blown upon by all the nipping draughts of the square, and as it might be sinking deeper and deeper into its dejection. As for me, instead of desolating, the harsh disconsolateness of the scene seemed to uplift me; I savoured it with joy, as one savours the melancholy of a tragic work of art.

"We might go down to the *Signal* offices, and worry Buchanan a bit," said the doctor cheerfully when he came back to the car. This was the second of his inspirations.

Buchanan, of whom I had heard, was another Scotchman and the editor of the sole daily organ of the Five Towns, an evening newspaper cried all day in the streets and read by the entire population. Its green sheet appeared to be a permanent waving feature of the main thoroughfares. The offices lay round a corner close by, and as we drew up in front of them a crowd of tattered urchins interrupted their diversions in the sodden road to celebrate our glorious arrival by unanimously yelling at the top of their strident and hoarse voices:

"Hooray! Hoo—bl—dy—ray!"

Abashed, I followed my doctor into the shelter of the building, a new edifice, capacious and considerable, but horribly faced with terra cotta, and quite unimposing, lacking in the spectacular effect; like nearly everything in the Five Towns, carelessly and scornfully ugly! The mean, swinging double-doors returned to the assault when you pushed them, and hit you viciously. In a dark, countered room marked "Enquiries" there was nobody.

"Hi, there!" called the doctor.

A head appeared at a door.

"Mr. Buchanan upstairs?"

"Yes," snapped the head, and disappeared.

Up a dark staircase we went, and at the summit

were half flung back again by another self-acting door.

In the room to which we next came an old man and a youngish one were bent over a large, littered table, scribbling on and arranging pieces of grey tissue paper and telegrams. Behind the old man stood a boy. Neither of them looked up.

"Mr. Buchanan in his ——" the doctor began to question. "Oh! There you are!"

The editor was standing in hat and muffler at the window, gazing out. His age was about that of the doctor, forty or so; and like the doctor he was rather stout and clean-shaven. Their Scotch accents mingled in greeting, the doctor's being the more marked. Buchanan shook my hand with a certain courtliness, indicating that he was well accustomed to receive strangers. As an expert in small talk, however, he shone no brighter than his visitors, and the three of us stood there by the window awkwardly, in the heaped disorder of the room, while the other two men scratched and fidgeted with bits of paper at the soiled table.

Suddenly and savagely the old man turned on the boy:

"What the hades are you waiting there for?"

"I thought there was something else, sir."

"Sling your hook."

Buchanan winked at Stirling and me as the boy slouched off and the old man blandly resumed his writing.

"Perhaps you'd like to look over the place?" Buchanan suggested politely to me. "I'll come with you. It's all I'm fit for to-day. . . . 'Flu!" He glanced at Stirling, and yawned.

"Ye ought to be in bed," said Stirling.

"Yes. I know. I've known it for twelve years. I shall go to bed as soon as I get a bit of time to myself. Well, will you come? The half-time results are beginning to come in."

A telephone-bell rang impatiently.

"You might just see what that is, boss," said the old man without looking up.

Buchanan went to the telephone and replied into it: "Yes? What? Oh! Myatt? Yes, he's playing. . . . Of course I'm sure! Good-bye." He turned to the old man: "It's another of 'em wanting to know if Myatt is playing. Birmingham, this time."

"Ah!" exclaimed the old man, still writing.

"It's because of the betting," Buchanan glanced at me. "The odds are on Knype now,—three to two."

"If Myatt is playing, Knype have got me to thank for it," said the doctor, surprisingly.

"You?"

"Me! He fetched me to his wife this morning. She's nearing her confinement. False alarm. I guaranteed him at least another twelve hours."

"Oh! So that's it, is it?" Buchanan murmured.

Both the sub-editors raised their heads.

"That's it," said the doctor.

"Some people were saying he'd quarrelled with the trainer again, and was shamming," said Buchanan. "But I didn't believe that. There's no hanky-panky about Jos Myatt, anyhow."

I learnt in answer to my questions that a great and terrible football match was at that moment in progress at Knype, a couple of miles away, between the Knype Club and the Manchester Rovers. It was conveyed to me that the importance of this match was almost national, and that the entire district was practically holding its breath till the result should be known. The half-time result was one goal each.

"If Knype lose," said Buchanan explanatorily, "they'll find themselves pushed out of the First League at the end of the season. That's a cert . . . one of the oldest clubs in England! Semi-finalists for the English Cup in '78."

"'79," corrected the elder sub-editor.

I gathered that the crisis was grave.

"And Myatt's the captain, I suppose?" said I.

"No. But he's the finest full-back in the League."

I then had a vision of Myatt as a great man. By an effort of the imagination I perceived that the equivalent of the fate of nations depended upon him. I recollected, now, large yellow posters on the hoardings we had passed, with the names of Knype and of Manchester Rovers in letters a foot high and the legend "League match at Knype" over all. It seemed to me that the heroic name of

Jos Myatt, if truly he were the finest full-back in the League, if truly his presence or absence affected the betting as far off as Birmingham, ought also to have been on the posters, together with possibly his portrait. I saw Jos Myatt as a matador, with a long ribbon of scarlet necktie down his breast, and embroidered trousers.

"Why," said Buchanan, "if Knype drop into the Second Division, they'll never pay another dividend! It'll be all up with first class football in the Five Towns!"

The interests involved seemed to grow more complicated. And here I had been in the district nearly four hours without having guessed that the district was quivering in the tense excitement of gigantic issues! And here was this Scotch doctor, at whose word the great Myatt would have declined to play, never saying a syllable about the affair, until a chance remark from Buchanan loosened his tongue. But all doctors are strangely secretive. Secretiveness is one of their chief private pleasures.

"Come and see the pigeons, eh?" said Buchanan.

"Pigeons!" I repeated.

"We give the results of over a hundred matches in our Football Edition," said Buchanan, and added: "not counting Rugby."

As we left the room two boys dodged round us into it, bearing telegrams.

In a moment we were, in the most astonishing

manner, on a leaden roof of the *Signal* offices. High factory chimneys rose over the horizon of slates on every side, blowing thick smoke into the general murk of the afternoon sky, and crossing the western crimson with long pennons of black. And out of the murk there came from afar a blue-and-white pigeon which circled largely several times over the offices of the *Signal.* At length it descended, and I could hear the whirr of its strong wings. The wings ceased to beat and the pigeon slanted downwards in a curve, its head lower than its wide tail. Then the little head gradually rose and the tail fell; the curve had changed, the pace slackened; the pigeon was calculating with all its brain; eyes, wings, tail and feet were being co-ordinated to the resolution of an intricate mechanical problem. The pinkish claws seemed to grope — and after an instant of hesitation, the thing was done, the problem solved; the pigeon, with delicious gracefulness, had established equilibrium on the ridge of a pigeon-cote, and folded its wings, and was peering about with strange motions of its extremely movable head. Presently it flew down to the leads, waddled to and fro with the ungainly gestures of a fat woman of sixty, and disappeared into the cote. At the same moment the boy who had been dismissed from the sub-editor's room ran forward and entered the cote by a wire-screened door.

"Handy things, pigeons!" said the doctor as we approached to examine the cote. Fifty or sixty

pigeons were cooing and strutting in it. There was a protest of wings as the boy seized the last arriving messenger.

"Give it here!" Buchanan ordered.

The boy handed over a thin tube of paper which he had unfastened from the bird's leg. Buchanan unrolled it and showed it to me. I read: "Midland Federation. Axe United, Macclesfield Town. Match abandoned after half-hour's play owing to fog. Three forty-five."

"Three forty-five," said Buchanan, looking at his watch. "He's done the ten miles in half an hour, roughly. Not bad. First time we tried pigeons from as far off as Axe. Here, boy!" And he restored the paper to the boy, who gave it to another boy, who departed with it.

"Man," said the doctor, eyeing Buchanan. "Ye'd no business out here. Ye're not precisely a pigeon."

Down we went, one after another, by the ladder, and now we fell into the composing-room, where Buchanan said he felt warmer. An immense, dirty, white-washed apartment crowded with linotypes and other machines, in front of which sat men in white aprons, tapping, tapping,— gazing at documents pinned at the level of their eyes,—and tapping, tapping. A kind of cavernous retreat in which monstrous iron growths rose out of the floor and were met half way by electric flowers that had their roots in the ceiling! In this jungle there was scarcely room for us to walk. Buchanan explained the lino-

types to me. I watched, as though romantically dreaming, the flashing descent of letter after letter, a rain of letters into the belly of the machine; then, going round to the back, I watched the same letters rising again in a close, slow procession, and sorting themselves by themselves at the top in readiness to answer again to the tapping, tapping of a man in a once-white apron. And while I was watching all that, I could somehow, by a faculty which we have, at the same time see pigeons far overhead, arriving and arriving out of the murk from beyond the verge of chimneys.

"Ingenious, isn't it?" said Stirling.

But I imagine that he had not the faculty by which to see the pigeons.

A reverend, bearded, spectacled man, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up and an apron stretched over his hemispherical paunch, strolled slowly along an alley, glancing at a galley-proof with an ingenuous air just as if he had never seen a galley-proof before.

"It's a stick more than a column already," said he confidentially, offering the long paper, and then gravely looking at Buchanan, with head bent forward, not through his spectacles but over them.

The editor negligently accepted the proof, and I read a series of titles: "Knype *v.* Manchester Rovers. Record Gate. Fifteen thousand spectators. Two goals in twelve minutes. Myatt in form. Special Report."

Buchanan gave the slip back without a word.

"There you are!" said he to me, as another compositor near us attached a piece of tissue paper to his machine. It was the very paper that I had seen come out of the sky, but its contents had been enlarged and amended by the sub-editorial pen. The man began tapping, tapping, and the letters began to flash downwards on their way to tell a quarter of a million people that Axe *v.* Macclesfield had been stopped by fog.

"I suppose that Knype match is over by now?" I said.

"Oh, no!" said Buchanan. "The second half has scarcely begun."

"Like to go?" Stirling asked.

"Well," I said, feeling adventurous, "it's a notion, isn't it?"

"You can run Mr. Loring down there in five or six minutes," said Buchanan. "And he's probably never seen anything like it before. You might call here as you come home, and see the paper on the machines."

III

We went on the Grand Stand, which was packed with men whose eyes were fixed, with an unconscious but intense effort, on a common object. Among the men were a few women in furs and wraps, equally absorbed. Nobody took any notice of us as we insinuated our way up a rickety flight of wooden stairs, but when by misadventure we grazed a human being the elbow of that being

shoved itself automatically and fiercely outwards, to repel. I had an impression of hats, caps, and woolly overcoats stretched in long parallel lines, and of grimy raw planks everywhere presenting possibly dangerous splinters, save where use had worn them into smooth shininess. Then gradually I became aware of the vast field, which was more brown than green. Around the field was a wide border of infinitesimal hats and pale faces, rising in tiers, and beyond this border fences, hoardings, chimneys, furnaces, gasometers, telegraph-poles, houses, and dead trees. And here and there, perched in strange perilous places, even high up towards the sombre sky, were more human beings clinging. On the field itself, at one end of it, were a scattered handful of doll-like figures, motionless; some had white bodies, others red; and three were in black; all were so small and so far off that they seemed to be mere unimportant casual incidents in whatever recondite affair it was that was proceeding. Then a whistle shrieked, and all these figures began simultaneously to move, and then I saw a ball in the air. An obscure, uneasy murmuring rose from the immense multitude like an invisible but audible vapour. The next instant the vapour had condensed into a sudden shout. Now I saw the ball rolling solitary in the middle of the field, and a single red doll racing towards it; at one end was a confused group of red and white, and at the other two white dolls, rather lonely in the expanse. The single red doll overtook the ball and scudded along with it at his twinkling

toes. A great voice behind me bellowed with an incredible volume of sound:

"Now Jos!"

And another voice, further away, bellowed:

"Now Jos!"

And still more distantly the grim warning shot forth from the crowd:

"Now Jos! Now Jos!"

The nearer of the white dolls, as the red one approached, sprang forward. I could see a leg. And the ball was flying back in a magnificent curve into the skies; it passed out of my sight, and then I heard a bump on the slates of the roof of the grand stand, and it fell among the crowd in the stand-enclosure. But almost before the flight of the ball had commenced, a terrific roar of relief had rolled formidably round the field, and out of that roar, like rockets out of thick smoke, burst acutely ecstatic cries of adoration:

"Bravo Jos!"

"Good old Jos!"

The leg had evidently been Jos's leg. The nearer of these two white dolls must be Jos, darling of fifteen thousand frenzied people.

Stirling punched a neighbour in the side to attract his attention.

"What's the score?" he demanded of the neighbour, who scowled and then grinned.

"Two — one — agen uz!" The other growled. "It'll take our b——s all their time to draw. They're playing a man short."

"Accident?"

"No! Referee ordered him off for rough play."

Several spectators began to explain, passionately, furiously, that the referee's action was utterly bereft of common sense and justice; and I gathered that a less gentlemanly crowd would undoubtedly have lynched the referee. The explanations died down, and everybody except me resumed his fierce watch on the field.

I was recalled from the exercise of a vague curiosity upon the set, anxious faces around me by a crashing, whooping cheer which in volume and sincerity of joy surpassed all noises in my experience. This massive cheer reverberated round the field like the echoes of a battleship's broadside in a fiord. But it was human, and therefore more terrible than guns. I instinctively thought: "If such are the symptoms of pleasure, what must be the symptoms of pain or disappointment?" Simultaneously with the expulsion of the unique noise the expression of the faces changed. Eyes sparkled; teeth became prominent in enormous, uncontrolled smiles. Ferocious satisfaction had to find vent in ferocious gestures, wreaked either upon dead wood or upon the living tissues of fellow creatures. The gentle, mannerly sound of hand-clapping was a kind of light froth on the surface of the billowy sea of heart-felt applause. The host of the fifteen thousand might have just had their lives saved, or their children snatched from destruction and their wives from dis-

honour; they might have been preserved from bankruptcy, starvation, prison, torture; they might have been rewarding with their impassioned worship a band of national heroes. But it was not so. All that had happened was that the ball had rolled into the net of the Manchester Rovers' goal. Knype had drawn level. The reputation of the Five Towns before the jury of expert opinion that could distinguish between first-class football and second-class was maintained intact. I could hear specialists around me proving that though Knype had yet five League matches to play, its situation was safe. They pointed excitedly to a huge hoarding at one end of the ground on which appeared names of other clubs with changing figures. These clubs included the clubs which Knype would have to meet before the end of the season, and the figures indicated their fortunes on various grounds similar to this ground all over the country. If a goal was scored in Newcastle or in Southampton, the very Peru of first-class football, it was registered on that board and its possible effect on the destinies of Knype was instantly assessed. The calculations made were dizzying.

Then a little flock of pigeons flew up and separated, under the illusion that they were free agents and masters of the air, but really wafted away to fixed destinations on the stupendous atmospheric waves of still-continued cheering.

After a minute or two the ball was restarted, and the greater noise had diminished to the sensitive un-

easy murmur which responded like a delicate instrument to the fluctuations of the game. Each feat and manœuvre of Knype drew generous applause in proportion to its intention or its success, and each sleight of the Manchester Rovers, successful or not, provoked a holy disgust. The attitude of the host had passed beyond morality into religion.

Then, again, while my attention had lapsed from the field, a devilish, a barbaric, and a deafening yell broke from those fifteen thousand passionate hearts. It thrilled me; it genuinely frightened me. I involuntarily made the motion of swallowing. After the thunderous crash of anger from the host came the thin sound of a whistle. The game stopped. I heard the same word repeated again and again, in divers tones of exasperated fury:

"Foul!"

I felt that I was hemmed in by potential homicides, whose arms were lifted in the desire of murder and whose features were changed from the likeness of man into the corporeal form of some pure and terrible instinct.

And I saw a long doll rise from the ground and approach a lesser doll with threatening hands.

"Foul! Foul!"

"Go it, Jos! Knock his neck out! Jos! He tripped thee up!"

There was a prolonged gesticulatory altercation between the three black dolls in leathern leggings and several of the white and the red dolls. At last one of the mannikins in leggings shrugged his

shoulders, made a definite gesture to the other two, and walked away towards the edge of the field nearest the stand. It was the unprincipled referee; he had disallowed the foul. In the protracted duel between the offending Manchester forward and the great, honest Jos Myatt he had given another point to the enemy. As soon as the host realised the infamy, it yelled once more in heightened fury. It seemed to surge in masses against the thick iron railings that alone stood between the referee and death. The discreet referee was approaching the grand stand as the least unsafe place. In a second a handful of executioners had somehow got on to the grass. And in the next second several policemen were in front of them, not striking nor striving to intimidate, but heavily pushing them into bounds.

"Get back there!" cried a few abrupt, commanding voices from the stand.

The referee stood with his hands in his pockets and his whistle in his mouth. I think that in that moment of acutest suspense the whole of his earthly career must have flashed before him in a phantasmagoria. And then the crisis was past. The inherent gentlemanliness of the outraged host had triumphed and the referee was spared.

"Served him right if they'd man-handled him!" said a spectator.

"Ay!" said another, gloomily, "Ay! And th' Football Association 'ud ha' fined us maybe a hundred quid and disqualified th' ground for the rest o' th' season!"

"D—n th' Football Association!"

"Ay! But you canna'!"

"Now lads! Play up Knype! Now lads! Give 'em hot hell!" Different voices heartily encouraged the home team as the ball was thrown into play.

The fouling Manchester forward immediately resumed possession of the ball. Experience could not teach him. He parted with the ball and got it again, twice. The devil was in him and in the ball. The devil was driving him towards Myatt. They met. And then came a sound quite new: a cracking sound, somewhat like the snapping of a bough, but sharper, more decisive.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Stirling. "That's his bone!"

And instantly he was off down the staircase and I after him. But he was not the first doctor on the field. Nothing had been unforeseen in the wonderful organisation of this enterprise. A pigeon sped away and an official doctor and an official stretcher appeared, miraculously, simultaneously. It was tremendous. It inspired awe in me.

"He asked for it!" I heard a man say as I hesitated on the shore of the ocean of mud.

Then I knew that it was Manchester and not Knype that had suffered. The confusion and hubbub were in a high degree disturbing and puzzling. But one emotion emerged clear: pleasure. I felt it myself. I was aware of joy in that the two sides were now levelled to ten men apiece. I was mys-

tically identified with the Five Towns, absorbed into their life. I could discern on every face the conviction that a divine providence was in this affair, that God could not be mocked. I too had this conviction. I could discern also on every face the fear lest the referee might give a foul against the hero Myatt, or even order him off the field, though of course the fracture was a simple accident. I too had this fear. It was soon dispelled by the news which swept across the entire enclosure like a sweet smell, that the referee had adopted the theory of a simple accident. I saw vaguely policemen, a stretcher, streaming crowds, and my ears heard a monstrous universal babbling. And then the figure of Stirling detached itself from the moving disorder and came to me.

"Well, Myatt's calf was harder than the other chap's, that's all," he said.

"Which *is* Myatt?" I asked, for the red and the white dolls had all vanished at close quarters, and were replaced by unrecognisably gigantic human animals, still clad, however, in dolls' vests and dolls' knickerbockers.

Stirling warningly jerked his head to indicate a man not ten feet away from me. This was Myatt, the hero of the host and the darling of populations. I gazed up at him. His mouth and his left knee were red with blood, and he was piebald with thick patches of mud from his tousled crown to his enormous boot. His blue eyes had a heavy, stupid,

honest glance; and of the three qualities stupidity predominated. He seemed to be all feet, knees, hands, and elbows. His head was very small,— the sole remainder of the doll in him.

A little man approached him, conscious — somewhat too obviously conscious — of his right to approach. Myatt nodded.

"Ye'n settled *him,* seemingly, Jos!" said the little man.

"Well," said Myatt, with slow bitterness. "Hadn't he been blooming well begging and praying for it, aw afternoon? Hadn't he now?"

The little man nodded. Then he said in a lower tone:

"How's missis, like?"

"Her's altogether yet," said Myatt. "Or I'd none ha' played!"

"I've bet Watty half-a-dollar as it inna' a lad!" said the little man.

Myatt seemed angry.

"Wilt bet me half a *quid* as it inna' a lad?" he demanded, bending down and scowling and sticking out his muddy chin.

"Ay!" said the little man, not blenching.

"Evens?"

"Evens."

"I'll take thee, Charlie," said Myatt, resuming his calm.

The whistle sounded. And several orders were given to clear the field. Eight minutes had been lost

over a broken leg, but Stirling said that the referee would surely deduct them from the official time, so that after all the game would not be shortened.

"I'll be up yon, to-morra morning," said the little man.

Myatt nodded and departed. Charlie, the little man, turned on his heel and proudly rejoined the crowd. He had been seen of all in converse with supreme greatness.

Stirling and I also retired; and though Jos Myatt had not even done his doctor the honour of seeing him, neither of us, I think, was quite without a consciousness of glory: I cannot imagine why. The rest of the game was flat and tame. Nothing occurred. The match ended in a draw.

IV

We were swept from the Football ground on a furious flood of humanity,— carried forth and flung down a slope into a large waste space that separated the ground from the nearest streets of little reddish houses. At the bottom of the slope, on my suggestion, we halted for a few moments aside, while the current rushed forward and, spreading out, inundated the whole space in one marvellous minute. The impression of the multitude streaming from that gap in the wooden wall was like nothing more than the impression of a burst main which only the emptying of the reservoir will assuage. Anybody who wanted to commit suicide might have stood in front of that gap and had his wish. He would not

have been noticed. The interminable and implacable infantry charge would have passed unheedingly over him. A silent, pre-occupied host, bent on something else now, and perhaps teased by the inconvenient thought that after all a draw is not as good as a win! It hurried blindly, instinctively outwards, knees and chins protruding, hands deep in pockets, chilled feet stamping. Occasionally some one stopped or slackened to light a pipe, and on being curtly bunted onward by a blind force from behind, accepted the hint as an atom accepts the law of gravity. The fever and ecstasy were over. What fascinated the Southern in me was the grim taciturnity, the steady stare (vacant or dreaming), and the heavy, muffled, multitudinous tramp shaking the cindery earth. The flood continued to rage through the gap.

Our automobile had been left at the Haycock Hotel; we went to get it, braving the inundation. Nearly opposite the stableyard the electric trams started for Hanbridge, Bursley and Turnhill, and for Longshaw. Here the crowd was less dangerous, but still very formidable — to my eyes. Each tram as it came up, was savagely assaulted, seized, crammed, and possessed, with astounding rapidity. Its steps were the western bank of a Beresina. At a given moment the inured conductor, brandishing his leather-shielded arm with a pitiless gesture, thrust aspirants down into the mud and the tram rolled powerfully away. All this in silence.

After a few minutes a bicyclist swished along

through the mud, taking the far side of the road, which was comparatively free. He wore grey trousers, heavy boots, and a dark cut-away coat, up the back of which a line of caked mud had deposited itself. On his head was a bowler-hat.

"How do, Jos?" cried a couple of boys, cheekily. And then there were a few adult greetings of respect.

It was the hero, in haste.

"Out of it, there!" he warned impeders, between his teeth, and plugged on with bent head.

"He keeps the Foaming Quart up at Toft End," said the doctor. "It's the highest pub in the Five Towns. He used to be what they call a pot-hunter, a racing bicyclist, you know. But he's got past that, and he'll soon be past football. He's thirty-four if he's a day. That's one reason why he's so independent — that and because he's almost the only genuine native in the team."

"Why?" I asked. "Where do they come from, then?"

"Oh!" said Stirling as he gently started the car. "The club buys 'em, up and down the country. Four of 'em are Scots. A few years ago, an Oldham Club offered Knype £500 for Myatt, a big price — more than he's worth now! But he wouldn't go, though they guaranteed to put him into a first-class pub — a free house. He's never cost Knype anything except his wages and the goodwill of the Foaming Quart."

"What are his wages?"

"Don't know exactly. Not much. The Football Association fix a maximum. I daresay about four pounds a week. *Hi there! Are you deaf?*"

"Thee mind what tha'rt about!" responded a stout loiterer in our path, "or I'll take thy ears home for my tea, mester."

Stirling laughed.

In a few minutes we had arrived at Hanbridge, splashing all the way between two processions that crowded either footpath. And in the middle of the road was a third procession, of trams,— tram following tram, each gorged with passengers, frothing at the step with passengers; not the lackadaisical trams that I had seen earlier in the afternoon in Crown Square; a different race of trams, eager and impetuous velocities. We reached the *Signal* offices. No crowd of urchins to salute us this time!

Under the earth was the machine-room of the *Signal.* It reminded me of the bowels of a ship, so full was it of machinery. One huge machine clattered slowly, and a folded green thing dropped strangely on to a little iron table in front of us. Buchanan opened it, and I saw that the broken leg was in it at length, together with a statement that in the *Signal's* opinion the sympathy of every true sportsman would be with the disabled player. I began to say something to Buchanan, when suddenly I could not hear my own voice. The great machine, with another behind us, was working at a fabulous speed and with a fabulous clatter. All that my startled senses could clearly disentangle was

that the blue arc-lights above us blinked occasionally, and that folded green papers were snowing down upon the iron table far faster than the eye could follow them. Tall lads in aprons elbowed me away and carried off the green papers in bundles, but not more quickly than the machine shed them. Buchanan put his lips to my ear. But I could hear nothing. I shook my head. He smiled, and led us out from the tumult.

"Come and see the boys take them," he said at the foot of the stairs.

In a sort of hall on the ground floor was a long counter, and beyond the counter a system of steel railings in parallel lines, so arranged that a person entering at the public door could only reach the counter by passing up or down each alley in succession. These steel lanes, which absolutely ensured the triumph of right over might, were packed with boys — the ragged urchins whom we had seen playing in the street. But not urchins now; rather young tigers! Perhaps half a dozen had reached the counter; the rest were massed behind, shouting and quarrelling. Through a hole in the wall, at the level of the counter, bundles of papers shot continuously, and were snatched up by servers, who distributed them in smaller bundles to the hungry boys; who flung down metal discs in exchange and fled, fled madly as though fiends were after them, through a third door, out of the pandemonium into the darkling street. And unceasingly the green papers appeared at the hole in the wall and unceasingly they were

plucked away and borne off by those maddened children, whose destination was apparently Aix or Ghent, and whose wings were their tatters.

"What are those discs?" I enquired.

"The lads have to come and buy them earlier in the day," said Buchanan. "We haven't time to sell this edition for cash, you see."

"Well," I said as we left, "I'm very much obliged."

"What on earth for?" Buchanan asked.

"Everything," I said.

We returned through the squares of Hanbridge and by Trafalgar Road to Stirling's house at Bleakridge. And everywhere in the deepening twilight I could see the urchins, often hatless and sometimes scarcely shod, scudding over the lamp-reflecting mire with sheets of wavy green, and above the noises of traffic I could hear the shrill outcry: "*Signal.* Football Edition. Football Edition. *Signal.*" The world was being informed of the might of Jos Myatt, and of the averting of disaster from Knype, and of the results of over a hundred other matches — not counting Rugby.

V

During the course of the evening, when Stirling had thoroughly accustomed himself to the state of being in sole charge of an expert from the British Museum, London, and the high walls round his more private soul had yielded to my timid but constant at-

tacks, we grew fairly intimate. And in particular the doctor proved to me that his reputation for persuasive raciness with patients was well founded. Yet up to the time of desert I might have been justified in supposing that that much praised "manner" in a sick-room was nothing but a provincial legend. Such may be the influence of a quite inoffensive and shy Londoner in the country. At half-past ten, Titus being already asleep for the night in an armchair, we sat at ease over the fire in the study telling each other stories. We had dealt with the arts, and with medicine; now we were dealing with life, in those aspects of it which cause men to laugh and women uneasily to wonder. Once or twice we had mentioned the Brindleys. The hour for their arrival was come. But being deeply comfortable and content where I was, I felt no impatience. Then there was a tap on the window.

"That's Bobbie!" said Stirling, rising slowly from his chair. "*He* won't refuse whisky, even if you do. I'd better get another bottle."

The tap was repeated, peevishly.

"I'm coming, laddie!" Stirling protested.

He slippered out through the hall and through the surgery to the side door, I following, and Titus sneezing and snuffling in the rear.

"I say, mester," said a heavy voice as the doctor opened the door. It was not Brindley, but Jos Myatt. Unable to locate the bell-push in the dark, he had characteristically attacked the sole illuminated

window. He demanded, or he commanded, very curtly, that the doctor should go up instantly to the Foaming Quart at Toft End.

Stirling hesitated a moment.

"All right, my man," said he calmly.

"Now?" the heavy, suspicious voice on the doorstep insisted.

"I'll be there before ye if ye don't sprint, man. I'll run up in the car." Stirling shut the door. I heard footsteps on the gravel path outside.

"Ye heard?" said he to me. "And what am I to do with ye?"

"I'll go with you, of course," I answered.

"I may be kept up there a while."

"I don't care," I said roisterously. "It's a pub and I'm a traveller."

Stirling's household was in bed, and his assistant gone home. While he and Titus got out the car, I wrote a line for the Brindleys: "Gone with doctor to see patient at Toft End. Don't wait up. A. L." This we pushed under Brindley's front door on our way forth. Very soon we were vibrating up a steep street on the first speed of the car, and the yellow reflections of distant furnaces began to shine over house roofs below us. It was exhilaratingly cold, a clear and frosty night, tonic, bracing after the enclosed warmth of the study. I was joyous, but silently. We had quitted the kingdom of the god Pan; we were in Lucina's realm, its consequence, where there is no laughter. We were on a mission.

"I didn't expect this," said Stirling.

"No?" I said. "But seeing that he fetched you this morning ——"

"Oh! That was only in order to be sure, for himself. His sister was there, in charge. Seemed very capable. Knew all about everything. Until ye get to the high social status of a clerk or a draper's assistant, people seem to manage to have their children without professional assistance."

"Then do you think there's anything wrong?" I asked.

"I'd not be surprised."

He changed to the second speed as the car topped the first bluff. We said no more. The night and the mission solemnised us. And gradually, as we rose towards the purple skies, the Five Towns wrote themselves out in fire on the irregular plain below.

"That's Hanbridge Town Hall," said Stirling, pointing to the right. "And that's Bursley Town Hall," he said, pointing to the left. And there were many other beacons, dominating the jewelled street-lines that faded on the horizon into golden-tinted smoke.

The road was never quite free of houses. After occurring but sparsely for half a mile, they thickened into a village — the suburb of Bursley called Toft End. I saw a moving red light in front of us. It was the reverse of Myatt's bicycle lantern. The car stopped near the dark façade of the inn, of which two yellow windows gleamed. Stirling, under My-

att's shouted guidance, backed into an obscure yard under cover. The engine ceased to throb.

"Friend of mine," he introduced me to Myatt. "By the way, Loring, pass me my bag, will you? Mustn't forget that." Then he extinguished the acetylene lamps, and there was no light in the yard except the ray of the bicycle lantern which Myatt held in his hand. We groped towards the house. Strange, every step that I take in the Five Towns seems to have the genuine quality of an adventure!

VI

In five minutes I was of no account in the scheme of things at Toft End, and I began to wonder why I had come. Stirling, my sole protector, had vanished up the dark stairs of the house, following a stout, youngish woman in a white apron, who bore a candle. Jos Myatt, behind, said to me: "Happen you'd better go in there, mester," pointing to a half open door at the foot of the stairs. I went into a little room at the rear of the bar-parlour. A good fire burned in a small old-fashioned grate, but there was no other light. The inn was closed to customers, it being past eleven o'clock. On a bare table I perceived a candle, and ventured to put a match to it. I then saw almost exactly such a room as one would expect to find at the rear of the bar-parlour of an inn on the outskirts of an industrial town. It appeared to serve the double purpose of a living-room and of a retreat for favoured customers. The table was evidently one at which men drank. On a

shelf was a row of bottles, more or less empty, bearing names famous in newspaper advertisements and in the House of Lords. The dozen chairs suggested an acute bodily discomfort such as would only be tolerated by a sitter all of whose sensory faculties were centred in his palate. On a broken chair in a corner was an insecure pile of books. A smaller table was covered with a chequered cloth on which were a few plates. Along one wall, under the window, ran a pitch-pine sofa upholstered with a stuff slightly dissimilar from that on the table. The mattress of the sofa was uneven and its surface wrinkled, and old newspapers and pieces of brown paper had been stowed away between it and the framework. The chief article of furniture was an effective walnut bookcase, the glass-doors of which were curtained with red cloth. The window, wider than it was high, was also curtained with red cloth. The walls, papered in a saffron tint, bore framed advertisements and a few photographs of self-conscious persons. The ceiling was as obscure as heaven; the floor tiled, with a list rug in front of the steel fender.

I put my overcoat on the sofa, picked up the candle and glanced at the books in the corner: Lavater's indestructible work, a paper-covered Whitaker, the Licensed Victualler's Almanac, "Johnny Ludlow," the illustrated catalogue of the Exhibition of 1856, Cruden's Concordance, and seven or eight volumes of Knight's Penny Encyclopædia. While I was poring on these titles I heard movements overhead

— previously there had been no sound whatever — and with guilty haste I restored the candle to the table and placed myself negligently in front of the fire.

"Now don't let me see ye up here any more till I fetch ye!" said a woman's distant voice — not crossly, but firmly. And then, crossly: "Be off with ye now!"

Reluctant boots on the stairs! Jos Myatt entered to me. He did not speak at first; nor did I. He avoided my glance. He was still wearing the cut-away coat with the line of mud up the back. I took out my watch, not for the sake of information, but from mere nervousness, and the sight of the watch reminded me that it would be prudent to wind it up.

"Better not forget that," I said, winding it.

"Ay!" said he gloomily. "It's a tip." And he wound up his watch; a large, thick, golden one.

This watch-winding established a basis of intercourse between us.

"I hope everything is going on all right," I murmured.

"What dun ye say?" he asked.

"I say I hope everything is going on all right," I repeated louder, and jerked my head in the direction of the stairs, to indicate the place from which he had come.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, as if surprised. "Now what'll ye have, mester?" He stood waiting. "It's my call, to-night."

I explained to him that I never took alcohol. It was not quite true, but it was as true as most general propositions are.

"Neither me!" he said shortly, after a pause.

"You're a teetotaler too?" I showed a little involuntary astonishment.

He put forward his chin.

"What do *you* think?" he said confidentially and scornfully. It was precisely as if he had said: "Do you think that anybody but a born ass would *not* be a teetotaler, in my position?"

I sat down on a chair.

"Take th' squab, mester," he said, pointing to the sofa. I took it.

He picked up the candle; then dropped it, and lighted a lamp which was on the mantelpiece between his vases of blue glass. His movements were very slow, hesitating, and clumsy. Blowing out the candle, which smoked for a long time, he went with the lamp to the bookcase. As the key of the bookcase was in his right pocket and the lamp in his right hand he had to change the lamp, cautiously, from hand to hand. When he opened the cupboard I saw a rich gleam of silver from every shelf of it except the lowest, and I could distinguish the forms of ceremonious cups with pedestals and immense handles.

"I suppose these are your pots?" I said.

"Ay!"

He displayed to me the fruits of his manifold victories. I could see him straining along endless cinder-paths and high-roads under hot suns, his great

knees going up and down like treadles amid the plaudits and howls of vast populations. And all that now remained of that glory were these debased and vicious shapes, magnificently useless, grossly ugly, with their inscriptions lost in a mess of flourishes.

"Ay!" he said again, when I had fingered the last of them.

"A very fine show indeed!" I said, resuming the sofa.

He took a penny bottle of ink and a pen out of the bookcase, and also, from the lowest shelf, a bag of money and a long narrow account book. Then he sat down at the table and commenced accountancy. It was clear that he regarded his task as formidable and complex. To see him reckoning the coins, manipulating the pen, splashing the ink, scratching the page; to hear him whispering consecutive numbers aloud, and muttering mysterious anathemas against the untamable naughtiness of figures,— all this was painful, and with the painfulness of a simple exercise rendered difficult by inaptitude and incompetence. I wanted to jump up and cry to him: "Get out of the way, man, and let me do it for you! I can do it all while you are wiping hairs from your pen on your sleeve." I was sorry for him because he was ridiculous — and even more grotesque than ridiculous. I felt, quite acutely, that it was a shame that he could not be for ever the central figure of a field of mud, kicking a ball into long and grandiose parabolas higher than gasometers, or breaking an occasional leg, surrounded by the violent affection of

hearts whose melting-point was the exclamation, "Good old Jos!" I felt that if he must repose his existence ought to have been so contrived that he could repose in impassive and senseless dignity, like a mountain watching the flight of time. The conception of him tracing symbols in a ledger, counting shillings and sixpences, descending to arithmetic, and suffering those humiliations which are the invariable preliminaries to legitimate fatherhood, was shocking to a nice taste for harmonious fitness. . . . What, this precious and terrific organism, this slave with a specialty — whom distant towns had once been anxious to buy at the prodigious figure of five hundred pounds, obliged to sit in a mean chamber and wait silently while the woman of his choice encountered the supreme peril! And he would "soon be past football!" He was "thirty-four if a day!" It was the verge of senility! He was no longer worth five hundred pounds. Perhaps even now this jointed merchandise was only worth two hundred pounds! And "they"— the shadowy directors, who could not kick a ball fifty feet and who would probably turn sick if they broke a leg — "they" paid him four pounds a week for being the hero of a quarter of a million of people! He was the chief magnet to draw fifteen thousand sixpences and shillings of a Saturday afternoon into a company's cash box, and here he sat splitting his head over fewer sixpences and shillings than would fill a half-pint pot! Jos, you ought in justice to have been José, with a thin red necktie down your breast (instead of a line

of mud up your back), and embroidered breeches on those miraculous legs, and an income of a quarter of a million pesetas, and the languishing acquiescence of innumerable mantillas. Every moment you were getting older and stiffer; every moment was bringing nearer the moment when young men would reply curtly to their doddering elders: "Jos Myatt — who was *'e?*"

The putting away of the ledger, the ink, the pen and the money was as exasperating as their taking-out had been. Then Jos, always too large for the room, crossed the tiled floor and mended the fire. A poker was more suited to his capacity than a pen. He glanced about him, uncertain and anxious, and then crept to the door near the foot of the stairs, and listened. There was no sound; and that was curious. The woman who was bringing into the world the hero's child made no cry that reached us below. Once or twice I had heard muffled movements not quite overhead — somewhere above — but naught else. The doctor and Jos's sister seemed to have retired into a sinister and dangerous mystery. I could not dispel from my mind pictures of what they were watching and what they were doing. The vast, cruel, fumbling clumsiness of nature, her lack of majesty in crises that ought to be majestic, her incurable indignity, disgusted me, aroused my disdain. I wanted, as a philosopher of all the cultures, to feel that the present was indeed a majestic crisis, to be so esteemed by a superior man. I could not. Though the crisis possibly intimidated me somewhat, yet on

behalf of Jos Myatt, I was ashamed of it. This may be reprehensible, but it is true.

He sat down by the fire and looked at the fire. I could not attempt to carry on a conversation with him, and to avoid the necessity for any talk at all, I extended myself on the sofa and averted my face, wondering once again why I had accompanied the doctor to Toft End. The doctor was now in another, an inaccessible world. I dozed, and from my doze I was roused by Jos Myatt going to the door on the stairs.

"Jos," said a voice. "It's a girl."

Then a silence.

I admit there was a flutter in my heart. Another soul, another formed and unchangeable temperament, tumbled into the world! Whence? Whither? . . . As for the quality of majesty,— yes, if silver trumpets had announced the advent, instead of a stout, aproned woman, the moment could not have been more majestic in its sadness. I say "sadness": which is the inevitable and sole effect of these eternal and banal questions, "Whence? Whither?"

"Is her bad?" Jos whispered.

"Her's pretty bad," said the voice, but cheerily. "Bring me up another scuttle o' coal."

When he returned to the parlour, after being again dismissed, I said to him:

"Well, I congratulate you."

"I thank ye!" he said, and sat down. Presently I could hear him muttering to himself, mildly: "Hell! Hell! Hell!"

I thought: "Stirling will not be very long now, and we can depart home." I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to two. But Stirling did not appear, nor was there any message from him or sign. I had to resign myself to the predicament. As a faint chilliness from the window affected my back I drew my overcoat up to my shoulders as a counterpane. Through a gap between the red curtains of the window I could see a star blazing. It passed behind the curtain with disconcerting rapidity. The universe was swinging and whirling as usual.

VII

Sounds of knocking disturbed me. In the few seconds that elapsed before I could realise just where I was and why I was there, the summoning knocks were repeated. The early sun was shining through the red blind. I sat up and straightened my hair, involuntarily composing my attitude so that nobody who might enter the room should imagine that I had been other than patiently wideawake all night. The second door of the parlour — that leading to the bar-room of the Foaming Quart — was open, and I could see the bar itself, with shelves rising behind it and the upright handles of a beer-engine at one end. Some one whom I could not see was evidently unbolting and unlocking the principal entrance to the inn. Then I heard the scraping of a creaky portal on the floor.

"Well, Jos, lad!"

It was the voice of the little man, Charlie, who had spoken with Myatt on the football field.

"Come in quick, Charlie. It's cowd [cold]," said the voice of Jos Myatt gloomily.

"Ay! Cowd it is, lad! It's above three mile as I've walked, and thou knows it, Jos. Give us a quartern o' gin."

The door grated again, and a bolt was drawn.

The two men passed together behind the bar, and so within my vision. Charlie had a grey muffler round his neck; his hands were far in his pockets and seemed to be at strain, as though trying to prevent his upper and his lower garments from flying apart. Jos Myatt was extremely dishevelled. In the little man's demeanour towards the big one, there was now none of the self-conscious pride in the mere fact of acquaintance that I had noticed on the field. Clearly the two were intimate friends, perhaps relatives. While Jos was dispensing the gin, Charlie said in a low tone:

"Well, what luck, Jos?"

This was the first reference, by either of them, to the crisis.

Jos deliberately finished pouring out the gin. Then he said:

"There's two on 'em, Charlie."

"Two on 'em? What mean'st tha', lad?"

"I mean as it's twins."

Charlie and I were equally startled.

"Thou never says!" he murmured, incredulous.

"Ay! One o' both sorts," said Jos.

"Thou never says!" Charlie repeated, holding his glass of gin steady in his hand.

"One come at summat after one o'clock, and th' other between five and six. I had for fetch old woman Eardley to help. It were more than a handful for Susannah and th' doctor."

Astonishing, that I should have slept through these events!

"How is her?" asked Charley quietly, as it were casually. I think this appearance of casualness was caused by the stoic suppression of the symptoms of anxiety.

"Her's bad," said Jos briefly.

"And I am na' surprised," said Charlie. And he lifted the glass. "Well — here's luck." He sipped the gin, savouring it on his tongue like a connoisseur and gradually making up his mind about its quality. Then he took another sip.

"Hast seen her?"

"I seed her for a minute, but our Susannah wouldna' let me stop i' th' room. Her was raving like."

"Missis?"

"Ay!"

"And th' babbies — hast seen *them?*"

"Ay! But I can make nowt out of 'em. Mrs. Eardley says as her's never seen no finer."

"Doctor gone?"

"That he has na'! He's bin up there all the blessed night, in his shirt-sleeves. I give him a stiff glass o' whisky at five o'clock and that's all as he's had."

Charlie finished his gin. The pair stood silent.

"Well," said Charlie, striking his leg. "Swelp me bob! It fair beats me! Twins! Who'd ha' thought it? Jos, lad, thou mays't be thankful as it isna' triplets. Never did I think, as I was footing it up here this morning, as it was twins I was coming to!"

"Hast got that half quid in thy pocket?"

"What half quid?" said Charlie defensively.

"Now then. Chuck us it over!" said Jos, suddenly harsh and overbearing.

"I laid thee half quid as it 'ud be a wench," said Charlie doggedly.

"Thou'rt a liar, Charlie!" said Jos. "Thou laid'st half a quid as it wasna' a boy."

"Nay, nay!" Charlie shook his head.

"And a boy it is!" Jos persisted.

"It being a lad *and* a wench," said Charlie, with a judicial air, "and me 'aving laid as it 'ud be a wench, I wins." In his accents and his gestures I could discern the mean soul, who on principle never paid until he was absolutely forced to pay. I could see also that Jos Myatt knew his man.

"Thou laidst me as it wasna' a lad," Jos almost shouted. "And a lad it is, I tell thee."

"*And* a wench!" said Charlie; then shook his head.

The wrangle proceeded monotonously, each party repeating over and over again the phrases of his own argument. I was very glad that Jos did not know me to be a witness of the making of the bet; other-

wise I should assuredly have been summoned to give judgment.

"Let's call it off, then," Charlie suggested at length. "That'll settle it. And it being twins ——"

"Nay, thou old devil, I'll none call it off. Thou owes me half a quid, and I'll have it out of thee."

"Look ye here," Charlie said more softly. "I'll tell thee what'll settle it. Which on 'em come first, th' lad or th' wench?"

"Th' wench come first," Jos Myatt admitted, with resentful reluctance, dully aware that defeat was awaiting him.

"Well, then! Th' wench is thy eldest child. That's law, that is. And what was us betting about, Jos lad? Us was betting about thy eldest and no other. I'll admit as I laid it wasna' a lad, as thou sayst. And it *wasna'* a lad. First come is eldest, and us was betting about eldest."

Charlie stared at the father in triumph.

Jos Myatt pushed roughly past him in the narrow space behind the bar, and came into the parlour. Nodding to me curtly, he unlocked the bookcase and took two crown pieces from a leathern purse which lay next to the bag. Then he returned to the bar, and banged the coins on the counter with fury.

"Take thy brass!" he shouted angrily. "Take thy brass! But thou'rt a damned shark, Charlie, and if anybody 'ud give me a plug o' bacca for doing it, I'd bash thy face in."

The other sniggered contentedly as he picked up his money.

"A bet's a bet," said Charlie.

He was clearly accustomed to an occasional violence of demeanour from Jos Myatt, and felt no fear. But he was wrong in feeling no fear. He had not allowed, in his estimate of the situation, for the exasperated condition of Jos Myatt's nerves under the unique experiences of the night.

Jos's face twisted into a hundred wrinkles and his hand seized Charlie by the arm whose hand held the coins.

"Drop 'em!" he cried loudly, repenting his naïve honesty. "Drop 'em! Or I'll ——"

The stout woman, her apron all soiled, now came swiftly and scarce heard into the parlour, and stood at the door leading to the bar-room.

"What's up, Susannah?" Jos demanded in a new voice.

"Well may ye ask what's up!" said the woman. "Shouting and brangling there, ye sots!"

"What's up?" Jos demanded again, loosing Charlie's arm.

"Her's gone!" the woman feebly whimpered, "Like that!" with a vague movement of the hand indicating suddenness. Then she burst into wild sobs, and rushed madly back whence she had come, and the sound of her sobs diminished as she ascended the stairs, and expired altogether in the distant shutting of a door.

The men looked at each other.

Charlie restored the crown-pieces to the counter, and pushed them towards Jos.

"Here!" he murmured faintly.

Jos flung them savagely to the ground. Another pause followed.

"As God is my witness," he exclaimed solemnly, his voice saturated with feeling, "As God is my witness," he repeated, "I'll ne'er touch a footba' again!"

Little Charlie gazed up at him sadly, plaintively, for what seemed a long while.

"It's good-bye to th' First League, then, for Knype!" he tragically muttered, at length.

VIII

Dr. Stirling drove the car very slowly back to Bursley. We glided gently down into the populous valleys. All the stunted trees were coated with rime, which made the sharpest contrast with their black branches and the black mud under us. The high chimneys sent forth their black smoke calmly and tirelessly into the fresh blue sky. Sunday had descended on the vast landscape like a physical influence. We saw a snake of children winding out of a dark brown Sunday school into a dark brown chapel. And up from the valleys came all the bells of all the temples of all the different gods of the Five Towns, chiming, clanging, ringing, each insisting that it alone invited to the altar of the one God. And priests and acolytes of the various cults hurried occasionally along, in silk hats and bright neckties, and

smooth coats with folded handkerchiefs sticking out of the pockets, busy, happy and self-important, the convinced heralds of eternal salvation: no doubt nor hesitation as to any fundamental truth had ever entered their minds. We passed through a long, straight street of new red houses with blue slate roofs, all gated and gardened. Here and there a girl with her hair in pins and a rough brown apron over a gaudy frock was stoning a front-step. And half-way down the street a man in a scarlet jersey, supported by two women in blue bonnets, was beating a drum and crying aloud: "My friends, you may die to-night. Where, I ask you, where —— ?" But he had no friends; not even a boy heeded him. The drum continued to bang in our rear.

I enjoyed all this. All this seemed to me to be fine, seemed to throw off the true, fine, romantic savour of life. I would have altered nothing in it. Mean, harsh, ugly, squalid, crude, barbaric,— yes, but what an intoxicating sense in it of the organised vitality of a vast community unconscious of itself! I would have altered nothing even in the events of the night. I thought of the rooms at the top of the staircase of the Foaming Quart,— mysterious rooms which I had not seen and never should see, recondite rooms from which a soul had slipped away and into which two had come, scenes of anguish and of frustrated effort! Historical rooms, surely! And yet not a house in the hundreds of houses past which we slid but possessed rooms ennobled and made august

by happenings exactly as impressive in their tremendous inexplicableness.

The natural humanity of Jos Myatt and Charlie, their fashion of comporting themselves in a sudden stress, pleased me. How else should they have behaved? I could understand Charlie's prophetic dirge over the ruin of the Knype Football Club. It was not that he did not feel the tragedy in the house. He had felt it, and because he had felt it he had uttered at random, foolishly, the first clear thought that ran into his head.

Stirling was quiet. He appeared to be absorbed in steering, and looked straight in front, yawning now and again. He was much more fatigued than I was. Indeed I had slept pretty well. He said as we swerved into Trafalgar Road and overtook the aristocracy on its way to chapel and church:

"Well, ye let yeself in for a night, young man! No mistake!"

He smiled, and I smiled.

"What's going to occur up there?" I asked, indicating Toft End.

"What do you mean?"

"A man like that — left with two babies!"

"Oh!" he said. "They'll manage that all right. His sister's a widow. She'll go and live with him. She's as fond of those infants already as if they were her own."

We drew up at his double gates.

"Be sure ye explain to Brindley," he said, as I

left him, "that it isn't my fault ye've had a night out of bed. It was your own doing. I'm going to get a bit of sleep now. See you this evening. Bob's asked me to supper."

A servant was sweeping Bob Brindley's porch, and the front door was open. I went in. The sound of the piano guided me to the drawing-room. Brindley, the morning cigarette between his lips, was playing one of Maurice Ravel's "Miroirs." He held his head back so as to keep the smoke out of his eyes. His children in their blue jerseys were building bricks on the carpet.

Without ceasing to play, he addressed me calmly:

"You're a nice chap! Where the devil have you been?"

And one of the little boys glancing up, said with roguish imitative innocence, in his high shrill voice:

"Where the del you been?"

A FEUD

WHEN Clive Timmis paused at the side-door of Ezra Brunt's great shop in Machin Street, and the door was opened to him by Ezra Brunt's daughter before he had had time to pull the bell, not only all Machin Street knew it within the hour, but also most persons of consequence left in Hanbridge on a Thursday afternoon — Thursday being early-closing day. For Hanbridge, though it counts sixty thousand inhabitants, and is the chief of the Five Towns — that vast, huddled congeries of boroughs devoted to the manufacture of earthenware — is a place where the art of attending to other people's business still flourishes in rustic perfection.

Ezra Brunt's drapery establishment was the foremost retail house, in any branch of trade, of the Five Towns. It had no rival nearer than Manchester, thirty-six miles off; and even Manchester could exhibit nothing conspicuously superior to it. The most acutely critical shoppers of the Five Towns — women who were in the habit of going to London every year for the January sales — spoke of Brunt's as a "right-down good shop." And the husbands of these ladies, manufacturers who employed from two hundred to a thousand men, regarded Ezra Brunt

as a commercial magnate of equal importance with themselves. Brunt, who had served his apprenticeship at Birmingham, started business in Machin Street in 1862, when Hanbridge was half its present size and all the best shops of the district were in Oldcastle, an ancient burg contiguous with, but holding itself proudly aloof from, the industrial Five Towns. He paid eighty pounds a year rent, and lived over the shop, and in the summer quarter his gas bill was always under a sovereign. For ten years success tarried, but in 1872 his daughter Eva was born and his wife died, and from that moment the sun of his prosperity climbed higher and higher into heaven. He had been profoundly attached to his wife, and, having lost her he abandoned himself to the mercantile struggle with that morose and terrible ferocity which was the root of his character. Of rude, gaunt aspect, gruffly taciturn by nature, and variable in temper, he yet had the precious instinct for soothing customers. To this day he can surpass his own shopwalkers in the admirable and tender solicitude with which, forsaking dialect, he drops into a lady's ear his famous stereotyped phrase: "Are you receiving proper attention, madam?" From the first he eschewed the facile trickeries and ostentations which allure the populace. He sought a high-class trade, and by waiting he found it. He would never advertise on hoardings; for many years he had no signboard over his shop-front; and whereas the name of "Bostocks," the huge cheap drapers lower down Machin Street, on the opposite side, attacks you at

every railway-station and in every tramcar, the name of "E. Brunt" is to be seen only in a modest regular advertisement on the front page of the *Staffordshire Signal.* Repose, reticence, respectability — it was these attributes which he decided his shop should possess, and by means of which he succeeded. To enter Brunt's, with its silently swinging doors, its broad, easy staircases, its long floors covered with warm, red linoleum, its partitioned walls, its smooth mahogany counters, its unobtrusive mirrors, its rows of youths and virgins in black, and its pervading atmosphere of quietude and discretion, was like entering a temple before the act of oblation has commenced. You were conscious of some supreme administrative influence everywhere imposing itself. That influence was Ezra Brunt. And yet the man differed utterly from the thing he had created. His was one of those dark and passionate souls which smoulder in this harsh Midland district as slag-heaps smoulder on the pit-banks, revealing their strange fires only in the darkness.

In 1899 Brunt's establishment occupied four shops, Nos. 52, 56, 58, and 60, in Machin Street. He had bought the freeholds at a price which timid people regarded as exorbitant, but the solicitors of Hanbridge secretly applauded his enterprise and shrewdness in anticipating the enormous rise in ground-values which has now been in rapid, steady progress there for more than a decade. He had thrown the interiors together and rebuilt the frontages in handsome freestone. He had also purchased

several shops opposite, and rumour said that it was his intention to offer these latter to the Town Council at a low figure if the Council would cut a new street leading from his premises to the Market Square. Such a scheme would have met with general approval. But there was one serious hiatus in the plans of Ezra Brunt — to wit, No. 54, Machin Street. No. 54, separating 52 and 56, was a chemist's shop, shabby but sedate as to appearance, owned and occupied by George Christopher Timmis, a mild and venerable citizen, and a local preacher in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion. For nearly thirty years Brunt had coveted Mr. Timmis's shop; more than twenty years have elapsed since he first opened negotiations for it. Mr. Timmis was by no means eager to sell — indeed, his attitude was distinctly a repellent one — but a bargain would undoubtedly have been concluded had not a report reached the ears of Mr. Timmis to the effect that Ezra Brunt had remarked at the Turk's Head that "th' old leech was only sticking out for every brass farthing he could get." The report was untrue, but Mr. Timmis believed it, and from that moment Ezra Brunt's chances of obtaining the chemist's shop vanished completely. His lawyer expended diplomacy in vain, raising the offer week by week till the incredible sum of three thousand pounds was reached. Then Ezra Brunt himself saw Mr. Timmis, and without a word of prelude said:

"Will ye take three thousand guineas for this bit o' property?"

"Not thirty thousand guineas," said Mr. Tim-

mis quietly; the stern pride of the benevolent old local preacher had been aroused.

"Then be damned to you!" said Ezra Brunt, who had never been known to swear before.

Thenceforth a feud existed, not less bitter because it was a feud in which nothing was said and nothing done — a silent and implacable mutual resistance. The sole outward sign of it was the dirty and stumpy brown-brick shop-front of Mr. Timmis, squeezed in between those massive luxurious façades of stone which Ezra Brunt soon afterwards erected. The pharmaceutical business of Mr. Timmis was not a very large one, and, fiscally, Ezra Brunt could have swallowed him at a meal and suffered no inconvenience; but in that the aged chemist had lived on just half his small income for some fifty years past, his position was impregnable. Hanbridge smiled cynically at this *impasse* produced by an idle word, and, recognising the equality of the antagonists, leaned neither to one side nor to the other. At intervals, however, the legend of the feud was embroidered with new and effective detail in the mouth of some inventive gossip, and by degrees it took high place among those piquant social histories which illustrate the real life of a town, and which parents recount to their children with such zest in moods of reminiscence.

When George Christopher Timmis buried his wife, Ezra Brunt, as a near neighbour, was asked to the funeral. "The cortège will move at 1.30," ran the printed invitation, and at 1.15 Brunt's carriage was

decorously in place behind the hearse and the two mourning-coaches. The demeanour of the chemist and the draper towards each other was a sublime answer to the demands of the occasion; some people even said that the breach had been healed, but these were not of the discerning.

The most active person at the funeral was the chemist's only nephew, Clive Timmis, partner in a small but prosperous firm of majolica manufacturers at Bursley. Clive, who was seldom seen in Hanbridge, made a favourable impression on everyone by his pleasing, unaffected manner and his air of discretion and success. He was a bachelor of thirty-two, and lived in lodgings at Bursley. On the return of the funeral-party from the cemetery, Clive Timmis found Brunt's daughter Eva in his uncle's house. Uninvited, she had left her place in the private room at her father's shop in order to assist Timmis's servant Sarah in the preparation of that solid and solemn repast which must inevitably follow every proper interment in the Five Towns. Without false modesty, she introduced herself to one or two of the men who had surprised her at her work, and then quietly departed just as they were sitting down to table and Sarah had brought in the hot tea-cakes. Clive Timmis saw her only for a moment, but from that moment she was his one thought. During the evening, which he spent alone with his uncle, he behaved in every particular as a nephew should, yet he was acting a part; his real self roved after Ezra Brunt's daughter, wherever she might be. Clive had

never fallen in love, though several times in his life he had tried hard to do so. He had long wished to marry — wished ardently; he had even got into the way of regarding every woman he met — and he met many — in the light of a possible partner. "Can it be *she?*" he had asked himself a thousand times, and then answered half sadly, "No." Not one woman had touched his imagination, coincided with his dream. It is strange that after seeing Eva Brunt he forgot thus to interrogate himself. For a fortnight, while he went his ways as usual, her image occupied his heart, throwing that once orderly chamber into the wildest confusion; and he let it remain, dimly aware of some delicious danger. He inspected the image every night before he slept, and every morning when he awoke, and made no effort to define its distracting charm; he knew only that Eva Brunt was absolutely and in every detail unlike all other women. On the second Sunday he murmured during the sermon: "But I only saw her for a minute." A few days afterwards he took the tram to Hanbridge.

"Uncle," he said, "how should you like me to come and live here with you? I've been thinking things out a bit, and I thought perhaps you'd like it. I expect you must feel rather lonely now."

The neat, fragrant shop was empty, and the two men stood behind the big glass-fronted case of Burroughs and Wellcome's preparations. Clive's venerable uncle happened to be looking into a drawer marked "Gentianæ Rad. Pulv." He closed the

drawer with slow hesitation, and then, stroking his long white beard, replied in that deliberate voice which seemed always to tremble with religious fervour:

"The hand of the Lord is in this thing, Clive. I have wished that you might come to live here with me. But I was afraid it would be too far from the works."

"Pooh! that's nothing," said Clive.

As he lingered at the shop door for the Bursley car to pass the end of Machin Street, Eva Brunt went by. He raised his hat with diffidence, and she smiled. It was a marvellous chance. His heart leapt into a throb which was half agony and half delight.

"I am in love," he said gravely.

He had just discovered the fact, and the discovery filled him with exquisite apprehension.

If he had waited till the age of thirty-two for that springtime of the soul which we call love, Clive had not waited for nothing. Eva was a woman to enravish the heart of a man whose imagination could pierce the agitating secrets immured in that calm and silent bosom. Slender and scarcely tall, she belonged to the order of spare, slight-made women, who hide within their slim frames an endowment of profound passion far exceeding that of their more voluptuously-formed sisters, who never coarsen into stoutness, and who at forty are as disturbing as at twenty. At this date Eva was twenty-six. She had a rather small, white face, which was a mask to

the casual observer, and the very mirror of her feelings to anyone with eyes to read its signs.

"I tell you what you are like," said Clive to her once: "you are like a fine racehorse, always on the quiver."

Yet many people considered her cold and impassive. Her walk and bearing showed a sensitive independence, and when she spoke it was usually in tones of command. The girls in the shop, where she was a power second only to Ezra Brunt, were a little afraid of her, chiefly because she poured terrible scorn on their small affectations, jealousies, and vendettas. But they liked her because, in their own phrase, "there was no nonsense about" this redoubtable woman. She hated shams and make-believes with a bitter and ruthless hatred. She was the heiress to at least five thousand a year, and knew it well, but she never encouraged her father to complicate their simple mode of life with the pomps of wealth. They lived in a house with a large garden at Pireford, which is on the summit of the steep ridge between the Five Towns and Oldcastle, and they kept two servants and a coachman, who was also gardener. Eva paid the servants good wages, and took care to get good value therefor.

"It's not often I have any bother with my servants," she would say, "for they know that if there is any trouble I would just as soon clear them out and put on an apron and do the work myself."

She was an accomplished house-mistress, and could bake her own bread: in towns not one woman in a

thousand can bake. With the coachman she had little to do, for she could not rid herself of a sentimental objection to the carriage — it savoured of "airs"; when she used it she used it as she might use a tramcar. It was her custom, every day except Saturday, to walk to the shop about eleven o'clock, after her house had been set in order. She had been thoroughly trained in the business, and had spent a year at a first-rate shop in High Street, Kensington. Millinery was her speciality, and she still watched over that department with a particular attention; but for some time past she had risen beyond the limitations of departments, and assisted her father in the general management of the vast concern. In commercial aptitude she resembled the typical Frenchwoman.

Although he was her father, Ezra Brunt had the wit to recognise her talents, and he always listened to her suggestions, which, however, sometimes startled him. One of them was that he should import into the Five Towns a modiste from Paris, offering a salary of two hundred a year. The old provincial stood aghast. He had the idea that all Parisian women were stage-dancers. And to pay four pounds a week to a female!

Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Bertot — styled in the shop "Madame" — now presides over Ezra Brunt's dressmakers, draws her four pounds a week (of which she saves two), and by mere nationality has given a unique distinction and success to her branch of the business.

Eva occupied a small room opening off the principal showroom, and during hours of work she issued thence but seldom. Only customers of the highest importance might speak with her. She was a power felt rather than seen. Employés who knocked at her door always did so with a certain awe of what awaited them on the other side, and a consciousness that the moment was unsuitable for levity. "If you please, Miss Eva ——" Here she gave audience to the "buyers" and window-dressers, listened to complaints and excuses, and occasionally had a secret orgy of afternoon tea with one or two of her friends. None but these few girls — mostly younger than herself, and remarkable only in that their dislike of the snobbery of the Five Towns, though less fiercely displayed, agreed with her own — really knew Eva. To them alone did she unveil herself, and by them she was idolised.

"She is simply splendid when you know her — such a jolly girl!" they would say to other people; but other people, especially other women, could not believe it. They fearfully respected her because she was very well dressed and had quantities of money. But they called her "a curious creature"; it was inconceivable to them that she should choose to work in a shop; and her tongue had a causticity which was sometimes exceedingly disconcerting and mortifying. As for men, she was shy of them, and, moreover, she loathed the elaborate and insincere ritual of deference which the average man practises towards women unrelated to him, particularly when they are

young and rich. Her father she adored, without knowing it; for he often angered her, and humiliated her in private. As for the rest, she was, after all, only six-and-twenty.

"If you don't mind, I should like to walk along with you," Clive Timmis said to her one Sunday evening in the porch of the Bethesda Chapel.

"I shall be glad," she answered at once; "father isn't here, and I'm all alone."

Ezra Brunt was indeed seldom there, counting in the matter of attendance at chapel among what were called "the weaker brethren."

"I am going over to Oldcastle," Clive explained calmly.

So began the formal courtship — more than a month after Clive had settled in Machin Street, for he was far too discreet to engender by precipitancy any suspicion in the haunts of scandal that his true reason for establishing himself in his uncle's household was a certain rich young woman who was to be found every day next door. Guided as much by instinct as by tact, Clive approached Eva with an almost savage simplicity and naturalness of manner, ignoring not only her father's wealth, but all the feigned punctilio of a wooer. His face said: "Let there be no beating about the bush — I like you." Hers answered: "Good! we will see."

From the first he pleased her, and not least in treating her exactly as she would have wished to be treated — namely, as a quite plain person of that part of the middle class which is neither upper nor

lower. Few men in the Five Towns would have been capable of forgetting Ezra Brunt's income in talking to Ezra Brunt's daughter. Fortunately, Timmis had a proud, confident spirit — the spirit of one who, unaided, has wrested success from the world's deathlike clutch. Had Eva the reversion of fifty thousand a year instead of five, he, Clive, was still a prosperous plain man, well able to support a wife in the position to which God had called him.

Their walks together grew more and more frequent, and they became intimate, exchanging ideas and rejoicing openly at the similarity of those ideas. Although there was no concealment in these encounters, still, there was a circumspection which resembled the clandestine. By a silent understanding Clive did not enter the house at Pireford; to have done so would have excited remark, for this house, unlike some, had never been the rendezvous of young men; much less, therefore, did he invade the shop. No! The chief part of their love-making (for such it was, though the term would have roused Eva's contemptuous anger) occurred in the streets; in this they did but follow the traditions of their class. Thus, the idyll, so matter-of-fact upon the surface, but within which glowed secret and adorable fires, progressed towards its culmination. Eva, the artless fool — oh, how simple are the wisest at times! — thought that the affair was hid from the shop. But was it possible? Was it possible that in those tiny bedrooms on the third floor, where the heavy evening hours were ever lightened with breathless

interminable recitals of what some "he" had said and some "she" had replied, such an enthralling episode should escape discovery? The dormitories knew of Eva's "attachment" before Eva herself. Yet none knew how it was known. The whisper arose like Venus from a sea of trivial gossip, miraculously, exquisitely. On the night when the first rumour of it traversed the passages there was scarcely any sleep at Brunt's, while Eva up at Pireford slumbered as a young girl.

On the Thursday afternoon with which we began, Brunt's was deserted save for the housekeeper and Eva, who was writing letters in her room.

"I saw you from my window, coming up the street," she said to Clive, "and so I ran down to open the door. Will you come into father's room? He is in Manchester for the day, buying."

"I knew that," said Timmis.

"How did you know?" She observed that his manner was somewhat nervous and constrained.

"You yourself told me last night — don't you remember?"

"So I did."

"That's why I sent the note round this morning to say I'd call this afternoon. You got it, I suppose?"

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, what is this business you want to talk about?"

It was spoken with a brave carelessness, but he caught the tremor in her voice, and saw her little

hand shake as it lay on the table amid her father's papers. Without knowing why he should do so, he stepped hastily forward and seized that hand. Her emotion unmanned him. He thought he was going to cry; he could not account for himself.

"Eva," he said thickly, "you know what the business is; you know, don't you?"

She smiled. That smile, the softness of her hand, the sparkle in her eye, the heave of her small bosom . . . it was the divinest miracle! Clive, manufacturer of majolica, went hot and then cold, and then his wits were suddenly his own again.

"That's all right," he murmured, and sighed, and placed on Eva's lips the first kiss that had ever lain there.

"Dear boy," she said later, "you should have come up to Pireford, not here, and when father was there."

"Should I?" he answered happily. "It just occurred to me all of a sudden this morning that you would be here, and that I couldn't wait."

"You will come up to-night and see father?"

"I had meant to."

"You had better go home now."

"Had I?"

She nodded, putting her lips tightly together — a trick of hers.

"Come up about half-past eight."

"Good! I will let myself out."

He left her, and she gazed dreamily at the window, which looked on to a whitewashed yard. The

next moment someone else entered the room with heavy footsteps. She turned round a little startled.

It was her father.

"Why! You *are* back early, father! How ——" She stopped. Something in the old man's glance gave her a premonition of disaster. To this day she does not know what accident brought him from Manchester two hours sooner than usual, and to Machin Street instead of Pireford.

"Has young Timmis been here?" he enquired curtly.

"Yes."

"Ha!" with subdued, sinister satisfaction, "I saw him going out. He didna see me." Ezra Brunt deposited his hat and sat down.

Intimate with all her father's various moods, she saw instantly and with terrible certainty that a series of chances had fatally combined themselves against her. If only she had not happened to tell Clive that her father would be at Manchester this day! If only her father had adhered to his customary hour of return! If only Clive had had the sense to make his proposal openly at Pireford some evening! If only he had left a little earlier! If only her father had not caught him going out by the side-door on a Thursday afternoon when the place was empty! Here, she guessed, was the suggestion of furtiveness which had raised her father's unreasoning anger, often fierce, and always incalculable.

"Clive Timmis has asked me to marry him, father."

"Has he?"

"Surely you must have known, father, that he and I were seeing each other a great deal."

"Not from your lips, my girl."

"Well, father——" Again she stopped, this strong and capable woman, gifted with a fine brain to organise and a powerful will to command. She quailed, robbed of speech, before the causeless, vindictive, and infantile wrath of an old man who happened to be in a bad temper. She actually felt like a naughty schoolgirl before him. Such is the tremendous influence of lifelong habit, the irresistible power of the *patria potestas* when it has never been relaxed. Ezra Brunt saw in front of him only a cowering child. "Clive is coming up to see you to-night," she went on timidly, clearing her throat.

"Humph! Is he?"

The rosy and tender dream of five minutes ago lay in fragments at Eva's feet. She brooded with stricken apprehension upon the forms of obstruction which his despotism might choose.

The next morning Clive and his uncle breakfasted together as usual in the parlour behind the chemist's shop.

"Uncle," said Clive brusquely, when the meal was nearly finished, "I'd better tell you that I've proposed to Eva Brunt."

Old George Timmis lowered the *Manchester Guardian* and gazed at Clive over his steel-rimmed spectacles.

"She's a good girl," he remarked; "she will make you a good wife. Have you spoken to her father?"

"That's the point. I saw him last night and I'll tell you what he said. These were his words: 'You can marry my daughter, Mr. Timmis, when your uncle agrees to part with his shop!'"

"That I shall never do, nephew," said the aged patriarch quietly and deliberately.

"Of course you won't, uncle. I shouldn't think of suggesting it. I'm merely telling you what he said." Clive laughed harshly. "Why," he added, "the man must be mad!"

"What did the young woman say to that?" his uncle inquired.

Clive frowned.

"I didn't see her last night," he said. "I didn't ask to see her. I was too angry."

Just then the post arrived, and there was a letter for Clive, which he read and put carefully in his waistcoat pocket.

"Eva writes asking me to go to Pireford to-night," he said, after a pause. "I'll soon settle it, depend on that. If Ezra Brunt refuses his consent, so much the worse for him. I wonder whether he actually imagines that a grown man and a grown woman are to be . . . Ah, well, I can't talk about it! It's too silly. I'll be off to the works."

When Clive reached Pireford that night, Eva herself opened the door to him. She was wearing

a grey frock, and over it a large white apron, perfectly plain.

"My girls are both out to-night," she said, "and I was making some puffs for the sewing-meeting tea. Come into the breakfast-room. . . . This way," she added, guiding him. He had entered the house on the previous night for the first time. She spoke hurriedly, and, instead of stopping in the breakfast-room, wandered uncertainly through it into the greenhouse, to which it gave access by means of a French window. In the dark, confined space, amid the close-packed blossoms, they stood together. She bent down to smell at a musk-plant. He took her hand and drew her soft and yielding form towards him and kissed her warm face.

"Oh, Clive!" she said. "Whatever are we to do?"

"Do?" he replied, enchanted by her instinctive feminine surrender and reliance upon him, which seemed the more precious in that creature so proud and reserved to all others. "Do! Where is your father?"

"Reading the *Signal* in the dining-room."

Every business man in the Five Towns reads the *Staffordshire Signal* from beginning to end every night.

"I will see him. Of course he is your father; but I will just tell him — as decently as I can — that neither you nor I will stand this nonsense."

"You mustn't — you mustn't see him."

"Why not?"

"It will only lead to unpleasantness."

"That can't be helped."

"He never, never changes when once he has *said* a thing. I know him."

Clive was arrested by something in her tone, something new to him, that in its poignant finality seemed to have caught up and expressed in a single instant that bitterness of a lifetime's renunciation which falls to the lot of most women.

"Will you come outside?" he asked in a different voice.

Without replying, she led the way down the long garden, which ended in an ivy-grown brick wall and a panorama of the immense valley of industries below. It was a warm, cloudy evening. The last silver tinge of an August twilight lay on the shoulder of the hill to the left. There was no moon, but the splendid watch-fires of labour flamed from ore-heap and furnace across the whole expanse, performing their nightly miracle of beauty. Trains crept with noiseless mystery along the middle distance, under their canopies of yellow steam. Further off the far-extending streets of Hanbridge made a map of starry lines on the blackness. To the south-east stared the cold, blue electric lights of Knype railway-station. All was silent, save for a distant thunderous roar, the giant breathing of the forge at Cauldon Bar Ironworks.

Eva leaned both elbows on the wall and looked forth.

"Do you mean to say," said Clive, "that Mr. Brunt will actually stick by what he has said?"

"Like grim death," said Eva.

"But what's his idea?"

"Oh! how can I tell you?" she burst out passionately.

"Perhaps I did wrong. Perhaps I ought to have warned him earlier — said to him, 'Father, Clive Timmis is courting me!' Ugh! He cannot bear to be surprised about anything. But yet he must have known. . . . It was all an accident, Clive — all an accident. He saw you leaving the shop yesterday. He would say he *caught* you leaving the shop — *sneaking* off like ——"

"But Eva ——"

"I know — I know! Don't tell me! But it was that, I am sure. He would resent the mere look of things, and then he would think and think, and the notion of your uncle's shop would occur to him again, after all these years. I can see his thoughts as plain . . . My dear, if he had not seen you at Machin Street yesterday, or if you had seen him and spoken to him, all might have gone right. He would have objected, but he would have given way in a day or two. Now he will never give way! I asked you just now what was to be done, but I knew all the time that there was nothing."

"There is one thing to be done, Eva, and the sooner the better."

"Do you mean that old Mr. Timmis must give up his shop to my father? Never! never!"

"I mean," said Clive quietly, "that we must marry without your father's consent."

She shook her head slowly and sadly, relapsing into calmness.

"You shake your head, Eva, but it must be so."

"I can't, my dear."

"Do you mean to say that you will allow your father's childish whim — for it's nothing else; he can't find any objection to me as a husband for you, and he knows it — that you will allow his childish whim to spoil your life and mine? Remember, you are twenty-six and I am thirty-two."

"I can't do it! I daren't! I'm mad with myself for feeling like this, but I daren't! And even if I dared I wouldn't. Clive, you don't know! You can't tell how it is!"

Her sorrowful, pathetic firmness daunted him. She was now composed, mistress again of herself, and her moral force dominated him.

"Then, you and I are to be unhappy all our lives, Eva?"

The soft influences of the night seemed to direct her voice as, after a long pause, she uttered the words: "No one is ever quite unhappy in all this world." There was another pause, as she gazed steadily down into the wonderful valley. "We must wait."

"Wait!" echoed Clive with angry grimness. "He will live for twenty years!"

"No one is ever quite unhappy in all this world,"

she repeated dreamily, as one might turn over a treasure in order to examine it.

Now for the epilogue to the feud. Two years passed, and it happened that there was to be a Revival at the Bethesda Chapel. One morning the superintendent minister and the revivalist called on Ezra Brunt at his shop. When informed of their presence, the great draper had an impulse of anger, for, like many stouter chapel-goers than himself, he would scarcely tolerate the intrusion of religion into commerce. However, the visit had an air of ceremony, and he could not decline to see these ambassadors of heaven in his private room. The revivalist, a cheery, shrewd man, whose powers of organisation were obvious, and who seemed to put organisation before everything else, pleased Ezra Brunt at once.

"We want a specially good congregation at the opening meeting to-night," said the revivalist. "Now, the basis of a good congregation must necessarily be the regular pillars of the church, and therefore we are making a few calls this morning to insure the presence of our chief men — the men of influence and position. You will come, Mr. Brunt, and you will let it be known among your employés that they will please you by coming too?"

Ezra Brunt was by no means a regular pillar of the Bethesda, but he had a vague sensation of flattery, and he consented; indeed, there was no alternative.

The first hymn was being sung when he reached the chapel. To his surprise, he found the place crowded in every part. A man whom he did not know led him to a wooden form which had been put in the space between the front pews and the Communion-rail. He felt strange there, and uneasy, apprehensive.

The usual discreet somnolence of the chapel had been disturbed as by some indecorous but formidable awakener; the air was electric; anything might occur. Ezra was astounded by the mere volume of the singing; never had he heard such singing. At the end of the hymn the congregation sat down, hiding their faces in expectation. The revivalist stood erect and terrible in the pulpit, no longer a shrewd, cheery man of the world, but the very mouthpiece of the wrath and mercy of God. Ezra's self-importance dwindled before that gaze, till, from a renowned magnate of the Five Towns, he became an item in the multitude of suppliants. He profoundly wished he had never come.

"Remember the hymn," said the revivalist, with austere emphasis:

> "'My richest gain I count but loss,
> And pour contempt on all my pride.'"

The admirable histrionic art with which he intensified the consonants in the last line produced a tremendous effect. Not for nothing was this man celebrated throughout Methodism as a saver of

souls. When, after a pause, he raised his hand and ejaculated, "Let us pray," sobs could be heard throughout the chapel. The Revival had begun.

At the end of a quarter of an hour Ezra Brunt would have given fifty pounds to be outside, but he could not stir; he was magnetised. Soon the revivalist came down from the pulpit and stood within the Communion-rail, whence he addressed the nearmost part of the people in low, soothing tones of persuasion. Apparently he ignored Ezra Brunt, but the man was convicted of sin, and felt himself melting like an icicle in front of a fire. He recalled the days of his youth, the piety of his father and mother, and the long traditions of a stern Dissenting family. He had backslidden, slackened in the use of the means of grace, run after the things of this world. It is true that none of his chiefest iniquities presented themselves to him; he was quite unconscious of them even then; but the lesser ones were more than sufficient to overwhelm him. Class-leaders were now reasoning with stricken sinners, and Ezra, who could not take his eyes off the revivalist, heard the footsteps of those who were going to the "inquiry-room" for more private counsel. In vain he argued that he was about to be ridiculous; that the idea of him, Ezra Brunt, a professed Wesleyan for half a century, being publicly "saved" at the age of fifty-seven was not to be entertained; that the town would talk; that his business might suffer if for any reason he should be morally bound to apply to it too strictly the prin-

ciples of the New Testament. He was under the spell. The tears coursed down his long cheeks, and he forgot to care, but sat entranced by the revivalist's marvellous voice. Suddenly, with an awful sob, he bent and hid his face in his hands. The spectacle of the old, proud man helpless in the grasp of profound emotion was a sight to rend the heart-strings.

"Brother, be of good cheer," said a tremulous and benign voice above him. "The love of God compasseth all things. Only believe."

He looked up and saw the venerable face and long white beard of George Christopher Timmis.

Ezra Brunt shrank away, embittered and ashamed.

"I cannot," he murmured with difficulty.

"The love of God is all-powerful."

"Will it make you part with that bit o' property, think you?" said Ezra Brunt, with a kind of despairing ferocity.

"Brother," replied the aged servant of God, unmoved, "if my shop is in truth a stumbling-block in this solemn hour, you shall have it."

Ezra Brunt was staggered.

"I believe! I believe!" he cried.

"Praise God!" said the chemist, with majestic joy.

Three months afterwards Eva Brunt and Clive Timmis were married. It is characteristic of the fine sentimentality which underlies the surface harshness of the inhabitants of the Five Towns that,

though No. 54 Machin Street was duly transferred to Ezra Brunt, the chemist retiring from business, he has never rebuilt it to accord with the rest of his premises. In all its shabbiness it stands between the other big dazzling shops as a reminding monument.

THE LION'S SHARE

I

IN the Five Towns the following history is related by those who know it as something side-splittingly funny — as one of the best jokes that ever occurred in a district devoted to jokes. And I, too, have hitherto regarded it as such. But upon my soul, now that I come to write it down, it strikes me as being, after all, a pretty grim tragedy. However, you shall judge, and laugh or cry as you please.

It began in the little house of Mrs. Carpole, up at Bleakridge, on the hill between Bursley and Hanbridge. Mrs. Carpole was the second Mrs. Carpole, and her husband was dead. She had a stepson, Horace, and a son of her own, Sidney. Horace is the hero, or the villain, of the history. On the day when the unfortunate affair began he was nineteen years old, and a model youth. Not only was he getting on in business, not only did he give half his evenings to the study of the chemistry of pottery and the other half to various secretaryships in connection with the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and Sunday-school, not only did he save money, not only was he a comfort to his stepmother and a sort

of uncle to Sidney, not only was he an early riser, a total abstainer, a non-smoker, and a good listener; but, in addition to the practice of these manifold and rare virtues, he found time, even at that tender age, to pay his tailor's bill promptly and to fold his trousers in the same crease every night — so that he always looked neat and dignified. Strange to say, he made no friends. Perhaps he was just a thought too perfect for a district like the Five Towns; a sin or so might have endeared him to the entire neighbourhood. Perhaps his loneliness was due to his imperfect sense of humour, or perhaps to the dull, unsmiling heaviness of his somewhat flat features.

Sidney was quite a different story. Sidney, to use his mother's phrase, was a little jockey. His years were then eight. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, as most little jockeys are, he had a smile and a scowl that were equally effective in tyrannising over both his mother and Horace, and he was beloved by everybody. Women turned to look at him in the street. Unhappily, his health was not good. He was afflicted by a slight deafness, which, however, the doctor said he would grow out of; the doctor predicted for him a lusty manhood. In the meantime, he caught every disease that happened to be about, and nearly died of each one. His latest acquisition had been scarlet fever. Now one afternoon, after he had "peeled" and his room had been disinfected, and he was beginning to walk again, Horace came home and decided that Sidney should be brought downstairs for tea as a treat, to celebrate his convalescence,

and that he, Horace, would carry him down-stairs. Mrs. Carpole was delighted with the idea, and Sidney also, except that Sidney did not want to be carried down-stairs — he wanted to walk down.

"I think it will be better for him to walk, Horace dear," said Mrs. Carpole, in her thin, plaintive voice. "He can, quite well. And you know how clumsy you are. Supposing you were to fall!"

Horace, nevertheless, in pursuance of his programme of being uncle to Sidney, was determined to carry Sidney. And carry Sidney he did, despite warnings and kickings. At least he carried him as far as the turn in the steep stairs, at which point he fell, just as his stepmother had feared, and Sidney with him. The half-brothers arrived on the ground floor in company, but Horace, with his eleven stone two, was on top, and the poor suffering little convalescent lay moveless and insensible.

It took the doctor forty minutes to bring him to, and all the time the odour of grilled herrings, which formed part of the uneaten tea, made itself felt through the house like a Satanic comment on the spectacle of human life. The scene was dreadful at first. The agony then passed. There were no bruises on the boy, not a mark, and in a couple of hours he seemed to be perfectly himself. Horace breathed again, and thanked Heaven it was no worse. His gratitude to Heaven was, however, slightly premature, for in the black middle of the night poor Sidney was seized with excruciating pains in the head, and the doctor lost four hours' sleep. These

pains returned at intervals of a few days, and naturally the child's convalescence was retarded. Then Horace said that Mrs. Carpole should take Sidney to Buxton for a fortnight, and he paid all the expenses of the trip out of his savings. He was desolated, utterly stricken; he said he should never forgive himself. Sidney improved, slowly.

II

After several months, during which Horace had given up all his limited spare time to the superintendence of the child's first steps in knowledge, Sidney was judged to be sufficiently strong to go to school, and it was arranged that he should attend the Endowed School at the Wedgwood Institution. Horace accompanied him thither on the opening day of the term — it was an inclement morning in January — and left the young delicate sprig, apparently joyous and content, to the care of his masters and the mercy of his companions. But Sidney came home for dinner weeping — weeping in spite of his new mortar-board cap, his new satchel, his new box of compasses and his new books. His mother kept him at home in the afternoon, and by the evening another of those terrible attacks had supervened. The doctor and Horace and Mrs. Carpole once more lost much precious sleep. The mysterious malady continued. School was out of the question.

And when Sidney took the air, in charge of his mother, everybody stopped to sympathise with him and to stroke his curls and call him a poor dear, and

also to commiserate Mrs. Carpole. As for Horace, Bursley tried to feel sorry for Horace, but it only succeeded in showing Horace that it was hiding a sentiment of indignation against him. Each friendly face as it passed Horace in the street said, without words, "There goes the youth who probably ruined his young stepbrother's life. And through sheer obstinacy too! He dropped the little darling in spite of warnings and protests, and then fell on top of him. Of course, he didn't do it on purpose, but——"

The doctor mentioned Greatorex of Manchester, the celebrated brain specialist. And Horace took Sidney to Manchester. They had to wait an hour and a quarter to see Greatorex, his well-known consulting-rooms in John Dalton Street being crowded with imperfect brains; but their turn came at last, and they found themselves in Greatorex's presence. Greatorex was a fat man, with the voice of a thin man, who seemed to spend the whole of his career in the care of his finger-nails.

"Well, my little fellow, said Greatorex, "don't cry." (For Sidney was already crying.) And then to Horace, in a curt tone: "What is it?"

And Horace was obliged to humiliate himself and relate the accident in detail, together with all that had subsequently happened.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" Greatorex would punctuate the recital, and when tired of "yes" he would say "Hum, hum, hum, hum!"

When he had said "hum" seventy-two times he

suddenly remarked that his fee was three guineas, and told Horace to strengthen Sidney all he could, not to work him too hard, and to bring him back in a year's time.

Horace paid the money, Greatorex emitted a final "hum," and then the stepbrothers were whisked out by an expeditious footman. The experience cost Horace over four pounds and the loss of a day's time. And the worst was that Sidney had a violent attack that very night.

School being impossible for him, Sidney had intermittent instruction from professors of both sexes at home. But he learnt practically nothing except the banjo. Horace had to buy him a banjo: it cost the best part of a ten-pound note; still, Horace could do no less. Sidney's stature grew rapidly; his general health certainly improved, yet not completely; he always had a fragile, interesting air. Moreover, his deafness did not disappear: there were occasions when it was extremely pronounced. And he was never quite safe from those attacks in the head. He spent a month or six weeks each year in the expensive bracing atmosphere of some seaside resort, and altogether he was decidedly a heavy drain on Horace's resources. People were aware of this, and they said that Horace ought to be happy that he was *in a position* to spend money freely on his poor brother. Had not the doctor predicted, before the catastrophe due to Horace's culpable negligence, that Sidney would grow into a strong man, and that his deafness would leave him? The truth was, one

never knew the end of those accidents in infancy! Further, was not Sidney's sad condition slowly killing his mother? It was whispered about that, since the disaster, Sidney had not been *quite* sound mentally. Was not the mere suspicion of this enough to kill any mother?

And, as a fact, Mrs. Carpole did die. She died of quinsy, doubtless aggravated by Sidney's sad condition.

Not long afterwards Horace came into a small fortune from his maternal grandfather. But poor Sidney did not come into any fortune, and people somehow illogically inferred that Horace had not behaved quite nicely in coming into a fortune while his suffering invalid brother, whom he had so deeply harmed, came into nothing. Even Horace had compunctions due to the visitations of a similar idea. And with part of the fortune he bought a house with a large garden up at Toft End, the highest hill of the hilly Five Towns, so that Sidney might have the benefit of the air. He also engaged a housekeeper and servants. With the remainder of the fortune he obtained a partnership in the firm of earthenware manufacturers for whom he had been acting as highly-paid manager.

Sidney reached the age of eighteen, and was most effective to look upon, his bright hair being still curly, and his eyes a wondrous blue, and his form elegant; and the question of Sidney's future arose. His health was steadily on the up grade. The deafness had quite disappeared. He had inclinations

towards art, and had already amused himself by painting some beautiful vases. So it was settled that he should enter Horace's works on the art side, with a view to becoming, ultimately, art director. Horace gave him three pounds a week, in order that he might feel perfectly independent, and, to the same end, Sidney paid Horace seven-and-sixpence a week for board and lodging. But the change of life upset the youth's health again. After only two visits to the works he had a grave recurrence of the head-attacks, and he was solemnly exhorted not to apply himself too closely to business. He therefore took several half-holidays a week, and sometimes a whole one. And even when he put in one of his full days he would arrive at the works three hours after Horace, and restore the balance by leaving an hour earlier. The entire town watched over him as a mother watches over a son. The notion that he was not *quite* right in the pate gradually died away, and everybody was thankful for that, though it was feared an untimely grave might be his portion.

III

She was a nice girl; the nicest girl that Horace had ever met with, because her charming niceness included a faculty of being really serious about serious things — and yet she could be deliciously gay. In short, she was a revelation to Horace. And her name was Ella, and she had come one year to spend some weeks with Mrs. Penkethman, the widowed head-mistress of the Wesleyan Day School, who was

her cousin. Mrs. Penkethman and Ella had been holidaying together in France; their arrival in Bursley naturally coincided with the reopening of the school in August for the autumn term.

Now at this period Horace was rather lonely in his large house and garden; for Sidney, in pursuit of health, had gone off on a six weeks' cruise round Holland, Finland, Norway and Sweden, in one of those Atlantic liners which, translated like Enoch without dying, become in their old age "steam-yachts," with fine names apt to lead to confusion with the private yacht of the Tsar of Russia. Horace had offered him the trip, and Horace was also paying his weekly salary as usual.

So Horace, who had always been friendly with Mrs. Penkethman, grew now more than ever friendly with Mrs. Penkethman. And Mrs. Penkethman and Ella were inseparable. The few aristocrats left in Bursley in September remarked that Horace knew what he was about, as it was notorious that Ella had the most solid expectations. But as a matter of fact Horace did not know what he was about, and he never once thought of Ella's expectations. He was simply, as they say in Bursley, knocked silly by Ella. He honestly imagined her to be the wonderfullest woman on the earth's surface, with her dark eyes and her expressive sympathetic gestures, and her alternations of seriousness and gaiety. It astounded him that a girl of twenty-one could have thought so deeply upon life as she had. The inexplicable thing

was that she looked up to *him*. She evidently admired *him*. He wanted to tell her that she was quite wrong about him, much too kind in her estimate of him — that really he was a very ordinary man indeed. But another instinct prevented him from thus undeceiving her.

And one Sunday afternoon, the season being late September, Horace actually got those two women up to tea in his house and garden. He had not dared to dream of such bliss. He had hesitated long before asking them to come, and in asking them he had blushed and stammered: the invitation had seemed to him to savour of audacity. But, bless you! they had accepted with apparent ecstasy. They gave him to think that they had genuinely wanted to come. And they came extra-specially dressed — visions, lilies of the field. And as the day was quite warm, tea was served in the garden, and everybody admired the view; and there was no restraint, no awkwardness. In particular Ella talked with an ease and a distinction that enchanted Horace, and almost made him talk with ease and distinction too. He said to himself that, seeing he had only known her a month, he was getting on amazingly. He said to himself that his good luck passed belief.

Then there was a sound of cab-wheels on the other side of the garden-wall, and presently Horace heard the housekeeper complimenting Sidney on his good looks, and Sidney asking the housekeeper to lend him three shillings to pay the cabman. The golden youth

had returned without the slightest warning from his cruise. The tea trio, at the lower end of the garden, saw him standing in the porch, tanned, curly, graceful, and young. Horace half rose, and then sat down again. Ella stared hard.

"That must be your brother," she said.

"Yes, that's Sid," Horace answered; and then, calling out loudly: "Come down here, Sid, and tell them to bring another cup and saucer."

"Right you are, old man," Sidney shouted. "You see I'm back. What! Mrs. Penkethman, is that you?" He came down the central path of the garden like a Narcissus.

"He *does* look delicate," said Ella under her breath to Horace. Tears came to her eyes.

Naturally Ella knew all about Sidney. She enjoyed the entire confidence of Mrs. Penkethman, and what Mrs. Penkethman didn't know of the private history of the upper classes in Bursley did not amount to very much.

These were nearly the last words that Ella spoke to Horace that afternoon. The introduction was made, and Sidney slipped into the party as comfortably as he slipped into everything, like a candle slipping into a socket. But nevertheless Ella talked no more. She just stared at Sidney, and listened to him. Horace was proud that Sidney made such an impression on her; he was glad that she showed no aversion to Sidney, because, in the event of Horace's marriage, where would Sidney live, if not with Horace and Horace's wife? Still, he could have wished

that Ella would continue to display her conversational powers.

Presently, Sidney lighted a cigarette. He was of those young men whose delicate mouths seem to have been fashioned for the nice conduct of a cigarette. And he had a way of blowing out the smoke that secretly ravished every feminine beholder. Horace still held to his boyhood's principles; but he envied Sidney a little.

At the conclusion of the festivity these two women naturally could not be permitted to walk home alone. And, naturally, also, the four could not walk abreast on the narrow pavements. Horace went first with Mrs. Penkethman. He was mad with anxiety to appropriate Ella, but he dared not. It would not have been quite correct; it would have been, as they say in Bursley, too thick. Besides, there was the question of age. Horace was over thirty, and Mrs. Penkethman was also — over thirty; whereas Sidney was twenty-one, and so was Ella. Hence Sidney walked behind with Ella, and the procession started in silence. Horace did not look round too often — that would not have been quite proper — but whenever he did look round the other couple had lagged farther and farther behind, and Ella seemed perfectly to have recovered her speech. At length he looked round, and lo! they had not turned the last corner; and they arrived at Mrs. Penkethman's cottage at Hillport a quarter of an hour after their elders.

IV

The wedding cost Horace a large sum of money. You see, he could not do less than behave handsomely by the bride, owing to his notorious admiration for her; and of course the bridegroom needed setting up. Horace practically furnished their home for them out of his own pocket; it was not to be expected that Sidney should have resources. Further, Sidney as a single man, paying seven-and-six a week for board and lodging, could no doubt struggle along upon three pounds weekly. But Sidney as a husband, with the nicest girl in the world to take care of, and house-rent to pay, could not possibly perform the same feat. Although he did no more work at the manufactory — Horace could not have been so unbrotherly as to demand it — Horace paid him eight pounds a week instead of three.

And the affair cost Horace a good deal besides money. But what could Horace do? He decidedly would not have wished to wreck the happiness of two young and beautiful lives, even had he possessed the power to do so. And he did not possess the power. These two did not consult Horace before falling in love. They merely fell in love, and there was end of it — and an end of Horace too! Horace had to suffer. He did suffer.

Perhaps it was for his highest welfare that other matters came to monopolise his mind. One sorrow drives out another. If you sit on a pin you are apt

to forget that you have the toothache. The earthenware manufactory was not going well. Plenty of business was being done, but not at the right prices. Crushed between the upper and nether millstones of the McKinley Tariff and German competition, Horace, in company with other manufacturers, was breathing out his life's blood in the shape of capital. The truth was that he had never had enough capital. He had heavily mortgaged the house at Toft End in order to purchase his partners' shares in the business and have the whole undertaking to himself, and he profoundly regretted it. He needed every penny that he could collect; the strictest economy was necessary if he meant to survive the struggle. And here he was paying eight pounds a week to a personage purely ornamental, after having squandered hundreds in rendering that personage comfortable! The situation was dreadful.

You may ask, Why did he not explain the situation to Sidney? Well, partly because he was too kind, and partly because he was too proud. and partly because Sidney would not have understood. Horace fought on, keeping up a position in the town and hoping that miracles would occur.

Then Ella's expectations were realised. Sidney and she had some twenty thousand pounds to play with. And they played the most agreeable games. But not in Bursley. No. They left Horace in Bursley and went to Llandudno for a spell. Horace envied them, but he saw them off at the station as an elder brother should, and tipped the porters.

Certainly he was relieved of the formality of paying eight pounds a week to his brother. But this did not help him much. The sad fact was that "things" (by which is meant fate, circumstances, credit, and so on) had gone too far. It was no longer a question of eight pounds a week; it was a question of final ruin.

Surely he might have borrowed money from Sidney? Sidney had no money; the money was Ella's, and Horace could not have brought himself to borrow money from a woman — from Ella, from a heavenly creature who always had a soothing sympathetic word for him. That would have been to take advantage of Ella. No, if you suggest such a thing you do not know Horace.

I stated in the beginning that he had no faults. He was therefore absolutely honest. And he called his creditors together while he could yet pay them twenty shillings in the pound. It was a noble act, rare enough in the Five Towns and in other parts of England. But he received no praise for it. He had only done what every man in his position ought to do. If Horace had failed for ten times the sum that his debts actually did amount to, and then paid two shillings in the pound instead of twenty, he would have made a stir in the world and been looked up to as no ordinary man of business.

Having settled his affairs in this humdrum, idiotic manner, Horace took a third-class return to Llandudno. Sidney and Ella were staying at the hydro with the strange Welsh name, and he found Sidney

lolling on the sunshiny beach in front of the hydro discoursing on the banjo to himself. When asked where his wife was, Sidney replied that she was lying down, and was obliged to rest as much as possible.

Horace, ashamed to trouble this domestic idyl, related his misfortunes as airily as he could.

And Sidney said he was awfully sorry, and had no notion how matters stood, and could he do anything for Horace? If so, Horace might ——

"No," said Horace, "I'm all right. I've very fortunately got an excellent place as manager in a big new manufactory in Germany." (This is how we deal with German competition in the Five Towns.)

"Germany?" cried Sidney.

"Yes," said Horace; "and I start the day after to-morrow."

"Well," said Sidney, "at any rate you'll stay the night."

"Thanks," said Horace, "you're very kind. I will."

So they went into the hydro together, Sidney caressing his wonderful new pearl-inlaid banjo; and Horace talked in low tones to Ella as she lay on the sofa. He convinced Ella that his departure to Germany was the one thing he had desired all his life, because it was not good that Ella should be startled, shocked or grieved.

They dined well.

But in the night Sidney had a recurrence of his old illness — a bad attack; and Horace sat up

through dark hours, fetched the doctor, and bought things at the chemist's. Towards morning Sidney was better. And Horace, standing near the bed, gazed at his stepbrother and tried in his stupid way to read the secrets beneath that curly hair. But he had no success. He caught himself calculating how much Sidney had cost him, at periods of his career when he could ill spare money; and, having caught himself, he was angry with himself for such baseness. At eight o'clock he ventured to knock at Ella's door and explain to her that Sidney had not been quite well. She had passed a peaceful night, for he had, of course, refrained from disturbing her.

He was not quite sure whether Sidney had meant him to stay at the hydro as his guest, so he demanded a bill, paid it, said good-bye, and left for Bonn-on-the-Rhine. He was very exhausted and sleepy. Happily the third-class carriages on the London & North-Western are pretty comfortable. Between Chester and Crewe he had quite a doze, and dreamed that he had married Ella after all, and that her twenty thousand pounds had put the earthenware business on a footing of magnificent and splendid security.

V

A few months later Horace's house and garden at Toft End were put up to auction by arrangement with his mortgagee and his trade-creditors. And Sidney was struck with the idea of buying the place. The impression was that it would go cheap. Sidney

said it would be a pity to let the abode pass out of the family. Ella said that the idea of buying it was a charming one, because in the garden it was that she had first met her Sidney. So the place was duly bought, and Sidney and Ella went to live there.

Several years elapsed.

Then one day little Horace was informed that his uncle Horace, whom he had never seen, was coming to the house on a visit, and that he must be a good boy, and polite to his uncle, and all the usual sort of thing.

And in effect Horace the elder did arrive in the afternoon. He found no one to meet him at the station, or at the garden gate of the pleasaunce that had once been his, or even at the front door. A pert parlour-maid told him that her master and mistress were up-stairs in the nursery, and that he was requested to go up. And he went up, and to be sure Sidney met him at the top of the stairs, banjo in hand, cigarette in mouth, smiling, easy and elegant as usual — not a trace of physical weakness in his face or form. And Horace was jocularly ushered into the nursery and introduced to his nephew. Ella had changed. She was no longer slim, and no longer gay and serious by turns. She narrowly missed being stout, and she was continuously gay, like Sidney. The child was also gay. Everybody was glad to see Horace, but nobody seemed deeply interested in Horace's affairs. As a fact he had done rather well in Germany, and had now come back to England in order to assume a working partnership in a small pot-

ting concern at Hanbridge. He was virtually beginning life afresh. But what concerned Sidney and Ella was themselves and their offspring. They talked incessantly about the infinitesimal details of their daily existence, and the alterations which they had made, or meant to make, in the house and garden. And occasionally Sidney thrummed a tune on the banjo to amuse the infant. Horace had expected them to be curious about Germany and his life in Germany. But not a bit! He might have come in from the next street and left them only yesterday, for all the curiosity they exhibited.

"Shall we go down to the drawing-room and have tea, eh?" said Ella.

"Yes, let's go and kill the fatted calf," said Sidney.

And strangely enough, inexplicably enough, Horace did feel like a prodigal.

Sidney went off with the precious banjo, and Ella picked up sundry belongings without which she never travelled about the house.

"You carry me down-stairs, unky?" the little nephew suggested, with an appealing glance at his new uncle.

"No," said Horace, "I'm dashed if I do!"

THE SILENT BROTHERS

I

JOHN and Robert Hessian, brothers, bachelors, and dressed in mourning, sat together after supper in the parlour of their house at the bottom of Oldcastle Street, Bursley. Maggie, the middle-aged servant, was clearing the table.

"Leave the cloth and the coffee," said John, the elder, "Mr. Liversage is coming in."

"Yes, Mr. John," said Maggie.

"Slate, Maggie," Robert ordered laconically, with a gesture towards the mantelpiece behind him.

"Yes, Mr. Robert," said Maggie.

She gave him a slate with slate-pencil attached, which hung on a nail near the mantelpiece.

Robert took the slate and wrote on it: *"What is Liversage coming about?"*

And he pushed the slate across the table to John.

Whereupon John wrote on the slate: *"Don't know. He telephoned me he wanted to see us to-night."*

And he pushed back the slate to Robert.

This singular procedure was not in the least attributable to deafness on the part of the brothers; they were in the prime of life, aged forty-two and

thirty-nine respectively, and in complete possession of all their faculties. It was due simply to the fact that they had quarrelled, and would not speak to each other. The history of their quarrel would be incredible were it not full of that ridiculous pathetic quality known as human nature, and did not similar things happen frequently in the manufacturing Midlands, where the general temperament is a fearful and strange compound of pride, obstinacy, unconquerableness, romance, and stupidity. Yes, stupidity.

No single word had passed between the brothers in that house for ten years. On the morning after the historical quarrel Robert had not replied when John spoke to him. "Well," said John's secret heart — and John's secret heart ought to have known better, as it was older than its brother heart — "I'll teach him a lesson. I won't speak until he does." And Robert's secret heart had somehow divined this idiotic resolution, and had said: "We shall see." Maggie had been the first to notice the stubborn silence. Then their friends noticed it, especially Mr. Liversage, the solicitor, their most intimate friend. But you are not to suppose that anybody protested very strongly. For John and Robert were not the kind of men with whom liberties may be taken; and, moreover, Bursley was slightly amused — at the beginning. It assumed the attitude of a disinterested spectator at a fight. It wondered who would win. Of course, it called both the brothers fools, yet in a tone somewhat sympathetic, because such a thing as

had occurred to the Hessians might well occur to any man gifted with the true Bursley spirit. There is this to be said for a Bursley man: Having made his bed, he will lie on it, and he will not complain.

The Hessians suffered severely by their self-imposed dumbness, but they suffered like Stoics. Maggie also suffered, and Maggie would not stand it. Maggie it was who had invented the slate. Indeed, they had heard some plain truths from that stout, bustling woman. They had not yielded, but they had accepted the slate in order to minimise the inconvenience to Maggie, and afterwards they deigned to make use of it for their own purposes. As for friends — friends accustomed themselves to the *status quo*. There came a time when the spectacle of two men chattering to everybody else in a company, and not saying a word to each other, no longer appealed to Bursley's sense of humour. The silent scenes at which Maggie assisted every day did not, either, appeal to Maggie's sense of humour, because she had none. So the famous feud grew into a sort of elemental fact of Nature. It was tolerated as the weather is tolerated. The brothers acquired pride in it; even Bursley regarded it as an interesting municipal curiosity. The sole imperfection in a lovely and otherwise perfect quarrel was that John and Robert, being both employed at Roycroft's Majolica Manufactory, the one as works manager and the other as commercial traveller, were obliged to speak to each other occasionally in the way of business. Artistically, this was a pity, though they did speak

very sternly and distantly. The partial truce necessitated by Roycroft's was confined strictly to Roycroft's. And when Robert was not on his journeys, these two tall, strong, dark, bearded men might often be seen of a night walking separately and doggedly down Oldcastle Street from the works, within five yards of each other.

And no one suggested the lunatic asylum. Such is the force of pride, of rank stupidity, and of habit.

The slate-scratching was scarcely over that evening when Mr. Powell Liversage appeared. He was a golden-haired man, with a jolly face, lighter and shorter in structure than the two brothers. His friendship with them dated from school-days, and it had survived even the entrance of Liversage into a learned profession. Liversage, who, being a bachelor like the Hessians, had many unoccupied evenings, came to see the brothers regularly every Saturday night, and one or other of them dropped in upon him most Wednesdays; but this particular night was a Thursday.

"How do?" John greeted him succinctly between two puffs of a pipe.

"How do?" replied Liversage.

"How do, Pow?" Robert greeted him in turn, also between two puffs of a pipe.

And "How do, little 'un?" replied Liversage.

A chair was indicated to him, and he sat down, and Robert poured out some coffee into a third cup which Maggie had brought. John pushed away the

extra special of the *Staffordshire Signal,* which he had been reading.

"What's up these days?" John demanded.

"Well," said Liversage, and both brothers noticed that he was rather ill at ease, instead of being humorous and lightly caustic as usual, "the will's turned up."

"The devil it has!" John exclaimed. "When?"

"This afternoon."

And then, as there was a pause, Liversage added: "Yes, my sons, the will's turned up."

"But where, you cuckoo, sitting there like that?" asked Robert. "Where?"

"It was in that registered letter addressed to your sister that the Post Office people wouldn't hand over until we'd taken out letters of administration."

"Well, I'm dashed!" muttered John. "Who'd have thought of that? You've got the will, then?"

Liversage nodded.

The Hessians had an elder sister, Mrs. Bott, widow of a colour merchant, and Mrs. Bott had died suddenly three months ago, the night after a journey to Manchester. (Even at the funeral the brothers had scandalised the town by not speaking to each other.) Mrs. Bott had wealth, wit, and wisdom, together with certain peculiarities, of which one was an excessive secrecy. It was known that she had made a will, because she had more than once notified the fact, in a tone suggestive of highly important issues, but the will had refused to be found. So Mr.

Liversage had been instructed to take out letters of administration of the estate, which, in the continued absence of the will, would be divided equally between the brothers. And twelve or thirteen thousand pounds may be compared to a financial beef-steak that cuts up very handsomely for two persons. The carving-knife was about to descend on its succulence, when, lo! the will!

"How came the will to be in the post?" asked Robert.

"The handwriting on the envelope was your sister's," said Liversage. "And the package was posted in Manchester. Very probably she had taken the will to Manchester to show it to a lawyer or something of that sort, and then she was afraid of losing it on the journey back, and so she sent it to herself by registered post. But before it arrived, of course, she was dead."

"That wasn't a bad scheme of poor Mary Ann's!" John commented.

"It was just like her!" said Robert, speaking pointedly to Liversage. "But what an odd thing!"

Now, both these men were, no doubt excusably, agonised by curiosity to learn the contents of the will. But would either of them be the first to express that curiosity? Never in this world! Not for the fortune itself! To do so would scarcely have been Bursleyish. It would certainly not have been Hessianlike. So Liversage was obliged at length to say —

"I reckon I'd better read you the will, eh?"

The brothers nodded.

"Mind you," said Liversage, "it's not my will. I've had nothing to do with it; so kindly keep your hair on. As a matter of fact, she must have drawn it up herself. It's not drawn properly at all, but it's witnessed all right, and it'll hold water, just as well as if the blooming Lord Chancellor had fixed it up for her in person."

He produced the document and read, awkwardly and self-consciously —

"'This is my will. You are both of you extremely foolish, John and Robert, and I've often told you so. Nobody has ever understood, and nobody ever will understand, why you quarrelled like that over Annie Emery. You are punishing yourselves, but you are punishing her as well, and it isn't fair her waiting all these years. So I give all my estate, no matter what it is, to whichever of you marries Annie. And I hope this will teach you a lesson. You need it more than you need my money. But you must be married within a year of my death. And if the one that marries cares to give five thousand pounds or so to the other, of course there's nothing to prevent him. This is just a hint. And if you don't either of you marry Annie within a year, then I just leave everything I have to Miss Annie Emery (spinster) stationer and fancy goods dealer, Duck Bank, Bursley. She deserves something for her disappointment, and she shall have it. Mr. Liversage, solicitor, must kindly be my executor. And I commit my soul to God, hoping for a blessed resurrection. 20th Janu-

ary, 1896. Signed Mary Ann Bott, widow.' As I told you, the witnessing is in order," Liversage finished.

"Give it here," said John shortly, and scanned the sheet of paper.

And Robert actually walked round the table and looked over his brother's shoulder — ample proof that he was terrifically moved.

"And do you mean to tell me that a will like that is good in law?" exclaimed John.

"Of course it's good in law," Liversage replied. "Legal phraseology is a useful thing, and it often saves trouble in the end; but it ain't indispensable, you know."

"Humph!" was Robert's comment as he resumed his seat and relighted his pipe.

All three men were nervous. Each was afraid to speak, afraid even to meet the eyes of the other two. An unmajestic silence followed.

"Well, I'll be off, I think," Liversage remarked at length with difficulty.

He rose.

"I say," Robert stopped him. "Better not say anything about this to Miss — to Annie, eh?"

"I will say nothing," agreed Liversage (infamously and unprofessionally concealing the fact that he had already said something).

And he departed.

The brothers sat in fluttered meditation over the past and the future.

Ten years before, Annie Emery had been an or-

phan of twenty-three, bravely starting in business for herself amid the plaudits of the admiring town; and John had fallen in love with her courage and her sense and her feminine charm. But alas, as Ovid points out, how difficult it is for a woman to please only one man! Robert also had fallen in love with Annie. Each brother had accused the other of underhand and unbrotherly practices in the pursuit of Annie. Each was profoundly hurt by the accusations, and each, in the immense fatuity of his pride, had privately sworn to prove his innocence by having nothing more to do with Annie. Such is life! Such is man! Such is the terrible egoism of man! And thus it was that, for the sake of wounded pride, John and Robert not only did not speak to one another for ten years, but they spoilt at least one of their lives; and they behaved ignobly to Annie, who would certainly have married either one or the other of them.

At two o'clock in the morning John pulled a coin out of his pocket and made the gesture of tossing.

"Who shall go first!" he explained.

Robert had a queer sensation in his spine as his elder brother spoke to him for the first time in ten years. He wanted to reply vocally. He had a most imperious desire to reply vocally. But he could not. Something stronger even than the desire prevented his tongue from moving.

John tossed the coin — it was a sovereign — and covered it with his hands.

"Tail!" Robert murmured, somewhat hoarsely.

But it was head.
Then they went to bed.

II

The side door of Miss Emery's shop was in Brick Passage, and not in the main street, so that a man, even a man of commanding stature and formidable appearance, might by insinuating himself into Brick Street, off King Street, and then taking the passage from the quieter end, arrive at it without attracting too much attention. This course was adopted by John Hessian. From the moment when he quitted his own house that Friday evening in June he had been subject to the delusion that the collective eye of Bursley was upon him. As a matter of fact, the collective eye of Bursley is much too large and important to occupy itself exclusively with a single individual. Bursley is not a village, and let no one think it. Nevertheless, John was subject to the delusion.

The shop was shut, as he knew it would be. But the curtained window of the parlour, between the side-door and the small shuttered side window of the shop, gave a strange suggestion of interesting virgin spotless domesticity within. John cast a fearful eye on the main thoroughfare. Nobody seemed to be passing. The chapel-keeper of the Wesleyan Chapel on the opposite side of Trafalgar Road was refreshing the massive Corinthian portico of that fane, and paying no regard whatever to the temple of Eros which Miss Emery's shop had suddenly become.

So John knocked.

"I am a fool!" his thought ran as he knocked.

Because he did not quite know what he was about. He had won the toss, and with it the right to approach Annie Emery before his brother. But what then? Well, he did desire to marry her, quite as much for herself as for his sister's fortune. But what then? How was he going to explain the tepidity, the desertion, the long sin against love of ten years? In short, how was he going to explain the inexplicable? He could decidedly do nothing that evening except make a blundering ass of himself. And how soon would Robert have the right to come along and say *his* say? That point had not been settled. Points so extremely delicate cannot be settled on a slate, and he had not dared to broach it *viva voce* to his younger brother. He had been too afraid of a rebuff.

He then hoped that Annie's servant would tell him that Annie was out.

Annie, however, took him at a disadvantage by opening the door herself.

"Well, *Mr. Hessian!*" she exclaimed, her face bursting into a swift and welcoming smile.

"I was just passing," the donkey in him blundered forth. "And I thought ——"

However, in fifteen seconds he was on the domestic side of the sitting-room window, and seated in the antimacassared arm-chair between the fire-place and the piano, and Annie had taken his hat and told him that her servant was out for the evening.

"But I'm disturbing your supper, Miss Emery,"

he said. Flurried though he was, he could not fail to notice the white embroidered cloth spread diagonally on the table, and the cold meat and the pastry and the glittering cutlery and crystal thereon.

"Not at all," she replied. "You haven't had supper yet, I expect?"

"No," he said, not thinking.

"It will be nice of you to help me eat mine," said she.

"Oh! But really ——"

But she got plates and things out of the cupboard below the bookcase — and there he was! She would take no refusal. It was wondrous.

"I'm awfully glad I came now," his thought ran. "I'm managing it rather well."

And —

"Poor Bob!"

His sole discomfort was that he could not invent a sufficiently ingenious explanation of his call. You can't tell a woman you've called to make love to her, and when your previous call happens to have been ten years ago, some kind of an explanation does seem to be demanded. Ultimately, as Annie was so very pleased to see him, so friendly, so feminine, so equal to the occasion, he decided to let his presence in her abode that night stand as one of those central facts in existence that need no explanation. And they went on talking and eating till the dusk deepened and Annie lit the gas and drew the blind.

He watched her on the sly as she moved about the room. He decided that she did not appear a day

older. There was the same plump, erect figure, the same neatness, the same fair skin and fair hair, the same little nose, the same twinkle in the eye — only perhaps the twinkle in the eye was a trifle less cruel than it used to be. She was not a day older. (In this he was of course utterly mistaken; she was ten years older, she was thirty-three, with ten years of successful commercial experience behind her; she would never be twenty-three again. Still she was a most desirable woman, and a woman infinitely beyond his deserts.) Her air of general capability impressed him. And with that there was mingled a strange softness, a marvellous hint of a concealed wish to surrender. . . . Well, she made him feel big and masculine — in brief, a man.

He regretted the lost ten years. His present way of life seemed intolerable to him. The new heaven opened its gate and gave glimpses of paradise. After all, he felt himself well qualified for that paradise. He felt that he had all along been a woman's man, without knowing it.

"By Jove!" his thought ran. "At this rate I might propose to her in a week or two."

And again —

"Poor old Bobbie!"

A quarter of an hour later, in some miraculous manner, they were more intimate than they had ever been, much more intimate. He revised his estimate of the time that must elapse before he might propose to her. In another five minutes he was fighting hard against a mad impulse to propose to her on the spot.

And then the fight was over, and he had lost. He proposed to her under the rose-coloured shade of the Welsbach light.

She drew away, as though shot.

And with the rapidity of lightning, in the silence which followed, he went back to his original criticism of himself, that he was a fool. Naturally she would request him to leave. She would accuse him of effrontery.

Her lips trembled. He prepared to rise.

"It's so sudden!" she said.

Bliss! Glory! Celestial joy! Her words were at least equivalent to an absolution of his effrontery! She would accept! She would accept! He jumped up and approached her. But she jumped up too and retreated. He was not to win his prize so easily.

"Please sit down," she murmured. "I must think it over," she said, apparently mastering herself. "Shall you be at chapel next Sunday morning?"

"Yes," he answered.

"If I am there, and if I am wearing white roses in my hat, it will mean ——" She dropped her eyes.

"Yes?" he queried.

And she nodded.

"And supposing you aren't there?"

"Then the Sunday after," she said.

He thanked her in his Hessian style.

"I prefer that way of telling you," she smiled demurely. "It will avoid the necessity for another — so much — you understand? . . ."

"Quite so, quite so!" he agreed. "I quite understand."

"And if I *do* see those roses," he went on, "I shall take upon myself to drop in for tea, may I?"

She paused.

"In any case you mustn't speak to me coming out of chapel, *please.*"

As he walked home down Oldcastle Street he said to himself that the age of miracles was not past; also that, after all, he was not so old as the tale of his years would mathematically indicate.

III

Her absence from chapel on the next Sunday disagreed with him. However, Robert was away nearly all the week, and he had the house to himself to dream in. It frequently happened to him to pass by Miss Emery's shop, but he caught no glimpse of her, and though he really was in serious need of writing-paper and envelopes, he dared not enter. Robert returned on the Friday.

On the morning of the second Sunday, John got up early, in order to cope with a new necktie that he had purchased in Hanbridge. Nevertheless he found Robert afoot before him, and Robert, by some unlucky chance, was wearing not merely a new necktie, but a new suit of clothes. They breakfasted in their usual august silence, and John gathered from a remark of Robert's to Maggie when she brought in the boots that Robert meant to go to chapel. Now,

Robert, being a commercial traveller and therefore a bit of a caution, did not attend chapel with any remarkable assiduity. And John, in the privacy of his own mind, blamed him for having been so clumsy as to choose that particular morning for breaking the habits of a lifetime. Still, the presence of Robert in the pew could not prejudicially affect John, and so there was no genuine cause for gloominess.

After a time it became apparent that each was waiting for the other to go. John began to get annoyed. At last he made the plunge and went. Turning his head half-way up Oldcastle Street, opposite the mansion which is still called "Miss Peel's," he perceived Robert fifty yards behind. It was a glorious June day.

He blushed as he entered chapel. If he was nervous, it may be accorded to him as excuse that the happiness of his life depended on what he could see within the next few minutes. However, he felt pretty sure, though it was exciting all the same.

To reach the Hessian pew he was obliged to pass Miss Emery's! And it was empty! Robert arrived.

The organist finished the voluntary. The leading tenor of the choir put up the number of the first hymn. The minister ascended the staircase of the great mahogany pulpit, and prayed silently, and arranged his papers in the leaves of the hymn-book, and glanced about to see who was there and who was presumably still in bed, and coughed; and then Miss Annie Emery sailed in with that air of false calm which is worn by the experienced traveller who catches a

train by the fifth of a second. The service commenced.

John looked.

She was wearing white roses. There could be no mistake as to that. There were about a hundred and fifty-five white roses in the garden of her hat.

What a thrill ran through John's heart! He had won Annie, and he had won the fortune. Yes, he would give Robert the odd five thousand pounds. His state of mind might even lead him to make it guineas. He heard not a word of the sermon, and throughout the service he rose up and sat down several instants after the rest of the congregation, because he was so absent-minded.

After service he waited for everybody else to leave, in order not to break his promise to the divine Annie. So did Robert. This ill-timed rudeness on Robert's part somewhat retarded the growth of a young desire in John's heart to make friends with poor Bob. Then he got up and left, and Robert followed.

They dined in silence, John deciding that he would begin his overtures of friendship after he had seen Annie, and could tell Robert that he was formally engaged. The brothers ate little. They both improved their minds during their repast — John with the *Christian Commonwealth,* and Robert with the Saturday cricket edition of the *Signal* (I regret it.)

Then, after pipes, they both went out for a walk, naturally not in the same direction. The magnificence of the weather filled them both with the joy of

life. As for John, he went out for a walk simply because he could not contain himself within the house. He could not wait immovable till four-thirty, the hour at which he meant to call on Annie for tea and the betrothal kiss. Therefore he ascended to Hillport and wandered as far as Oldcastle, all in a silk hat and frock-coat.

It was precisely half-past four as he turned, unassumingly, from Brick Street into Brick Passage, and so approached the side door of Annie Emery's. And his astonishment and anger were immense when he saw Robert, likewise in silk hat and frock-coat, penetrating into Brick Passage from the other end.

They met, and their inflamed spirits collided.

"What's the meaning of this?" John demanded, furious; and, simultaneously, Robert demanded: "What in Hades are *you* doing here?"

Only Sunday and the fine clothes and the proximity to Annie prevented actual warfare.

"I'm calling on Annie," said John.

"So am I," said Robert.

"Well, you're too late," said John.

"Oh, I'm late, am I?" said Robert, with a disdainful laugh. "Thanks!"

"I tell you you're too late," said John. "You may as well know at once that I've proposed to Annie and she's accepted me."

"I like that! I like that!" said Robert.

"Don't shout!" said John.

"I'm not shouting," said Robert. "But you may

as well know that you're mistaken, my boy. It's me that's proposed to Annie and been accepted. You must be off your chump."

"When did you propose to her?" said John.

"On Friday, if you must know," said Robert.

"And she accepted you at once?" said John.

"No. She said that if she was wearing white roses in her hat this morning at chapel, that would mean she accepted," said Robert.

"Liar!" said John.

"I suppose you'll admit she *was* wearing white roses in her hat?" said Robert, controlling himself.

"Liar!" said John, and continued breathless: "That was what she said to *me*. She must have told you that white roses meant a refusal."

"Oh no, she didn't!" said Robert, quailing secretly, but keeping up a formidable show of courage. "You're an old fool!" he added vindictively.

They were both breathing hard, and staring hard at each other.

"Come away," said John. "Come away! We can't talk here. She may look out of the window."

So they went away. They walked very quickly home, and, once in the parlour, they began to have it out. And, before they had done, the reading of cricket news on Sunday was as nothing compared to the desecrating iniquity which they committed. The scene was not such as can be decently recounted. But about six o'clock Maggie entered, and, at considerable personal risk, brought them back to a sense

of what was due to their name, the town, and the day. She then stated that she would not remain in such a house, and she departed.

IV

"But whatever made you do it, dearest?"

These words were addressed to Annie Emery on the glorious summer evening which closed that glorious summer day, and they were addressed to her by no other person than Powell Liversage. The pair were in the garden of the house in Trafalgar Road occupied by Mr. Liversage and his mother, and they looked westwards over the distant ridge of Hillport, where the moon was setting.

"Whatever made me do it!" repeated Annie, and the twinkle in her eye had that charming cruelty which John had missed. "Did they not deserve it? Of course, I can talk to you now with perfect freedom, can't I? Well, what do you *think* of it? Here for ten years neither one nor the other does more than recognise me in the street, and then all of a sudden they come down on me like that — simply because there's a question of money. I couldn't have believed men could be so stupid — no, I really couldn't! They're friends of yours, Powell, I know, but — however, that's no matter. But it was too ridiculously easy to lead them on! They'd swallow any flattery. I just did it to see what they'd do, and I think I arranged it pretty well. I quite expected they would call about the same time, and then shouldn't I have given them my mind! Unfortu-

nately they met outside, and got very hot — I saw them from the bedroom window — and went away."

"You mustn't forget, my dear girl," said Liversage, "that it was you they quarrelled about. I don't want to defend 'em for a minute, but it wasn't altogether the money that sent them to you; it was more that the money gave them an excuse for coming!"

"It was a very bad excuse, then!" said Annie.

"Agreed!" Liversage murmured.

The moon was extremely lovely and romantic against the distant spire of Hillport Church, and its effects on the couple was just what might have been anticipated.

"Perhaps I'm sorry," Annie admitted at length, with a charming grimace.

"Oh! I don't think there's anything to be *sorry* about," said Liversage. "But of course they'll think I've had a hand in it. You see, I've never breathed a word to them about — about my feelings towards you."

"No?"

"No. It would have been rather a delicate subject, you see, with them. And I'm sure they'll be staggered when they know that we got engaged last night. They'll certainly say I've — er — been after you for the —— No, they won't. They're decent chaps, really; very decent."

"Anyhow, you may be sure, dear," said Annie stiffly, "that *I* shan't rob them of their vile money! Nothing would induce me to touch it!"

"Of course not, dearest!" said Liversage — or, rather the finer part of him said it; the baser part somewhat regretted that vile twelve thousand or so. (I must be truthful.)

He took her hand again.

At the same moment old Mrs. Liversage came hastening down the garden, and Liversage dropped the hand.

"Powell," she said. "Here's John Hessian, and he wants to see you!"

"The dickens!" exclaimed Liversage, glancing at Annie.

"I must go," said Annie. "I shall go by the fields. Good-night, dear Mrs. Liversage."

"Wait ten seconds," Liversage pleaded, "and I'll be with you." And he ran off.

John, haggard and undone, was awaiting him in the drawing-room.

"Pow," said he, "I've had a fearful row with Bob, and I can't possibly sleep in our house to-night. Don't talk to me. But let me have one of the beds in your spare room, will you? There's a good chap."

"Why, of course, Johnnie," said Liversage. "Of course."

"And I'll go right to bed now," said John.

An hour later, after Powell Liversage had seen his affianced to her abode and returned home, and after his mother had gone to bed, there was a knock at the front door, and Liversage opened to Robert Hessian.

"Look here, Pow," said Robert, whose condition was deplorable, "I want to sleep here to-night. Do you mind? Fact is, I've had a devil of a shindy with Jack, and Maggie's run off, and, anyhow, I couldn't possibly stop in the same house with Jack to-night."

"But what —— ?"

"See here," said Robert. "I can't talk. Just let me have a bed in your spare room. I'm sure your mother won't mind."

"Why, certainly," said Liversage.

He lit a candle, escorted Robert up-stairs, opened the door of the spare room, gave the candle to Robert, pushed him in, said "Good-night," and shut the door.

What a night!

BEGINNING THE NEW YEAR

I

WE are a stolid and a taciturn race, we of the Five Towns. It may be because we are geographically so self contained; or it may be because we work in clay and iron; or it may merely be because it is our nature to be stolid and taciturn. But stolid and taciturn we are; and some of the instances of our stolidity and our taciturnity are enough to astound. They do not, of course, astound us natives; we laugh at them, we think they are an immense joke, and what the outer world may think does not trouble our deep conceit of ourselves. I have often wondered what would be the effect, other than an effect of astonishment, on the outer world, of one of these narratives illustrating our Five Towns peculiarities of deportment. And I intend for the first time in history to make such a narrative public property. I have purposely not chosen an extreme example; just an average example. You will see how it strikes you.

Toby Hall, once a burgess of Turnhill, the northern-most and smallest of the Five Towns, was passing, last New Year's Eve, through the district by

train on his way from Crewe to Derby. He lived at Derby, and he was returning from the funeral of a brother member of the Ancient Order of Foresters at Crewe. He got out of the train at Knype, the great railway centre of the Five Towns, to have a glass of beer in the second-class refreshment-room. It being New Year's Eve, the traffic was heavy and disorganised, especially in the refreshment-room, and when Toby Hall emerged on to the platform again the train was already on the move. Toby was neither young nor active. His years were fifty, and on account of the funeral he wore broadcloth and a silk hat, and his overcoat was new and encumbering. Impossible to take a flying leap into the train! He missed the train. And then he reflectively stroked his short grey beard (he had no moustache, and his upper lip was very long), and then he smoothed down his new overcoat over his rotund form.

"Young man," he asked a porter. "When's next train Derby way?"

"Ain't none afore to-morrow."

Toby went and had another glass of beer.

"D——d if I don't go to Turnhill," he said to himself slowly and calmly, as he paid for the second glass of beer.

He crossed the station by the subway and waited for the loop-line train to Turnhill. He had not set foot in the Five Towns for three-and-twenty years, having indeed carefully and continuously avoided it, as a man will avoid the street where his creditor lives. But he discovered no change in Knype railway-sta-

tion. And he had a sort of pleasure in the fact that he knew his way about it, knew where the loop-line trains started from, and other interesting little details. Even the special form of the loop-line time-table, pasted here and there on the walls of the station, had not varied since his youth. (We return Radicals to Parliament, but we are proud of a railway which for fine old English conservatism brooks no rival.)

Toby gazed around, half challengingly and half nervously — it was conceivable that he might be recognised, or might recognise. But no! Not a soul in the vast, swaying, preoccupied, luggage-laden crowds gave him a glance. As for him, although he fully recognised nobody, yet nearly every face seemed to be half-familiar. He climbed into a second-class compartment when the train drew up, and ten other people, all with third-class tickets, followed his example; three persons were already seated therein. The compartment was illuminated by one lamp, and in the Bleakridge Tunnel this lamp expired. Everything reminded him of his youth.

In twenty minutes he was leaving Turnhill station and entering the town. It was about nine o'clock, and colder than winters of the period usually are. The first thing he saw was an electric tram, and the second thing he saw was another electric tram. In Toby's time there were no trams at Turnhill, and the then recently-introduced steam-trams between Bursley and Longshaw, long since superseded, were regarded as the final marvel of science as applied to

traction. And now there were electric trams at Turnhill! The railway renewed his youth, but this darting electricity showed him how old he was. The Town Hall, which was brand-new when he left Turnhill, had the look of a mediæval *hôtel de ville* as he examined it in the glamour of the corporation's incandescent gas. And it was no more the sole impressive pile in the borough. The High Street and its precincts abounded in impressive piles. He did not know precisely what they were, but they had the appearance of being markets, libraries, baths, and similar haunts of luxury; one was a bank. He thought that Turnhill High Street compared very well with Derby. He would have preferred it to be less changed. If the High Street was thus changed, everything would be changed, including Child Row. The sole phenomenon that recalled his youth (except the Town Hall) was the peculiar smell of oranges and apples floating out on the frosty air from holly-decorated greengrocers' shops.

He passed through the Market Square, noting that sinister freak, the Jubilee Tower, and came to Child Row. The first building on your right as you enter Child Row from the square is the Primitive Methodist Chapel. Yes, it was still there; Primitive Methodism had not failed in Turnhill because Toby Hall had deserted the cause three-and-twenty years ago! But something serious had happened to the structure. Gradually Toby realised that its old face had been taken out and a new one put in; the classic pillars had vanished, and a series of Gothic arches

had been substituted by way of portico; a pretty idea, but not to Toby's liking. It was another change, another change! He crossed the street and proceeded downwards in the obscurity, and at length halted and peered with his little blue eyes at a small house (one of twins) on the other side from where he stood. That house, at any rate, was unchanged. It was a two-storeyed house, with a semicircular fanlight over a warped door of grained panelling. The blind of the window to the left of the door was irradiated from within, proving habitation.

"I wonder ——" ran Toby's thought. And he unhesitatingly crossed the street again, towards it, feeling first for the depth of the kerbstone with his umbrella. He had a particular and special interest in that house (No. 11 it was — and is), for, four-and-twenty years ago he had married it.

II

Four-and-twenty years ago Toby Hall (I need not say that his proper Christian name was Tobias) had married Miss Priscilla Bratt, then a calm and self-reliant young woman of twenty-three, and Priscilla had the house, together with a certain income, under the will of her father. The marriage was not the result of burning passion on either side. It was a union of two respectabilities, and it might have succeeded as well as such unions generally do succeed, if Priscilla had not too frequently mentioned the fact that the house they lived in was hers. He knew that the house was hers. The whole world was perfectly

aware of the ownership of the house, and her references to the matter amounted to a lack of tact. Several times Toby had indicated as much. But Priscilla took no heed. She had the hide of an alligator herself (though a personable girl), and she assumed that her husband's hide was of similar stuff. This assumption was justifiable, except that in just one spot the skin of Toby was tender. He really did not care to be reminded that he was living under his wife's roof. The reiteration settled on his nerves like a malady. And before a year had elapsed Priscilla had contrived to remind him once too often. And one day he put some things in a carpet-bag, and a hat on his head, and made for the door. The house was antique, and the front-parlour gave directly on to the street.

"Where be going?" Priscilla asked him.

He hesitated a second, and said —

"'Merica."

And he was. In the Five Towns we are apt to end our marriages in that laconic manner. Toby did not complain too much; he simply and unaffectedly went. It might be imagined that the situation was a trying one for Priscilla. Not so! Priscilla had experienced marriage with Toby and had found it wanting. She was content to be relieved of Toby. She had her house and her money and her self-esteem, and also tranquillity. She accepted the solution, and devoted her days to the cleanliness of the house.

Toby drew all the money he had out of the Burs-

ley and Turnhill Permanent Fifty Pounds Benefit Building Society (four shares, nearly paid up) and set sail — in the *Adriatic,* which was then the leading greyhound of the Atlantic — for New York. From New York he went to Trenton (New Jersey), which is the Five Towns of America. A man of his skill in handling clay on a wheel had no difficulty whatever in wresting a good livelihood from Trenton. When he had tarried there a year he caused a letter to be written to his wife informing her that he was dead. He wished to be quite free; and also (we have our feeling for justice) he wished his wife to be quite free. It did not occur to him that he had done anything extraordinary, either in deserting his wife or in forwarding false news of his death. He had done the simple thing, the casual thing, the blunt thing, the thing that necessitated the minimum of talking. He did not intend to return to England.

However, after a few years, he did return to England. The cause of his return is irrelevant to the history, but I may say that it sprang from a conflict between the Five Towns temperament and the Trenton Union of Earthenware Operatives. Such is the power of Unions in the United States that Toby, if he wished to remain under the Federal Flag, had either to yield or to starve. He would not yield. He changed his name and came to England; strolled calmly into the Crown Porcelain Works at Derby one day, and there recommenced his career as an artificer of earthenware. He did well. He could easily earn four pounds a week, and he had no desires, save

in the direction of fly-fishing — not an expensive diversion. He knew better than to marry. He existed quietly; and one year trod on the heels of another, and carried him from thirty to forty and from forty to fifty, and no one found out his identity, though there are several direct trains daily between Derby and Knype.

And, now, owing to the death of a friend and a glass of beer, he was in Child Row, crossing the street towards the house whose ownership had caused him to quit it.

He knocked on the door with the handle of his umbrella. There was no knocker; there never had been a knocker.

III

The door opened cautiously, as such doors in the Five Towns do, after a shooting of bolts and a loosing of chains; it opened to the extent of about nine inches, and Toby Hall saw the face of a middle-aged woman eyeing him.

"Is this Mrs. Hall's?" he asked sternly.

"No. It ain't Mrs. Hall's. It's Mrs. Tansley's."

"I thowt ——"

The door opened a little wider.

"That's not you, Tobias?" said the woman unmoved.

"I reckon it is, though," replied Toby, with a difficult smile.

"Bless us!" exclaimed the woman. The door

oscillated slightly under her hand. "Bless us!" she repeated. And then suddenly, "You'd happen better come in, Tobias."

"Ay!" said Tobias.

And he entered.

"Sit ye down, do," said his wife. "I thowt as you were dead. They wrote and told me so."

"Ay!" said Tobias. "But I am na'."

He sat down in an arm-chair near the old-fashioned grate, with its hobs at either side. He was acquainted with that chair, and it had not appreciably altered since his departure. The lastingness of furniture under fair treatment is astonishing. This chair was uncomfortable in exactly the same spot where it had always been uncomfortable; and the same antimacassar was draped over its uncompromising back. Toby put his hat on the table, and leaned his umbrella against the chimney-piece. His overcoat he retained. Same table; same chimney-piece; same clock and ornaments on the chimney-piece! But a different carpet on the floor, and different curtains before the window.

Priscilla bolted and chained the door, and then she too sat down. Her gown was black, with a small black silk apron. And she was stout, and she wore felt slippers and moved with the same gingerly care as Toby himself did. She looked fully her years. Her thin lips were firmer than ever. It was indeed Priscilla.

"Well, well!" she murmered.

But her capacity for wonder was nearly exhausted.

"Ay!" said Toby, with an air that was meant to be quasi-humorous. He warmed his hands at the fire, and then rubbed them over the front of his calves, leaning forward.

"So ye've come back!" said Priscilla.

"Ay!" concurred Toby.

There was a pause.

"Cold weather we're having," he muttered.

"It's seasonable," Priscilla pointed out.

Her glance rested on a sprig of holly that was tied under the gas-chandelier, unique relic of Christmas in the apartment.

Another pause. It would be hazardous to guess what their feelings were; perhaps their feelings were scarcely anything at all.

"And what be the news?" Toby enquired, with what passes in the Five Towns for geniality.

"News?" she repeated, as if not immediately grasping the significance of the question. "I don't know as there's any news, nothing partic'ler, that is."

Hung on the wall near the chimney-piece was a photograph of a girl. It was an excellent likeness of Priscilla, as she was in Toby's pre-Trenton days. How young and fresh the creature looked; so simple, so inexperienced! It startled Toby.

"I don't remember that," he said.

"What?"

"That!" And he jerked his elbow towards the photograph.

"Oh! *That!* That's my daughter," said Priscilla.

"Bless us!" said Toby in his turn.

"I married Job Tansley," Priscilla continued. "He died four years ago last Knype Wakes Monday. *Her's* married" — indicating the photograph — "her married young Gibson last September."

"Well, well!" murmured Toby.

Another pause.

There was a shuffling on the pavement outside, and some children began to sing about shepherds and flocks.

"Oh, bother them childer," said Priscilla. "I must send 'em off."

She got up.

"Here! Give 'em a penny," Toby suggested, holding out a penny.

"Yes, and then they'll tell others, and I shan't have a moment's peace all night!" Priscilla grumbled.

However, she bestowed the penny, cutting the song off abruptly in the middle. And she bolted and chained the door and sat down again.

Another pause.

"Well, well!" said Priscilla.

"Ay!" Toby agreed. "Good coal that!"

"Fourteen shilling a ton!"

Another pause, and a longer.

"Is Ned Walklate still at th' Rose and Crown?" Toby asked.

"For aught I know he is," said Priscilla.

"I'll just step round there," said Toby, picking up his hat and rising.

As he was manœuvring the door-chain, Priscilla said —

"You're forgetting your umbrella, Tobias."

"No," he answered. "I hanna' forgotten it. I'm coming back."

Their eyes met, charged with meaning.

"That'll be all right," she said. "Well, well!"

"Ay!"

And he stepped round to Ned Walklate's.

HIS WORSHIP THE GOOSEDRIVER

I

IT was an amiable but deceitful afternoon in the third week of December. Snow fell heavily in the windows of confectioners' shops, and Father Christmas smiled in Keats's Bazaar the fawning smile of a myth who knows himself to be exploded; but beyond these and similar efforts to remedy the forgetfulness of a careless climate, there was no sign anywhere in the Five Towns, and especially in Bursley, of the immediate approach of the season of peace, goodwill, and gluttony on earth.

At the Tiger, next door to Keats's market-place, Mr. Josiah Topham Curtenty had put down his glass (the port was kept specially for him), and told his boon companion, Mr. Gordon, that he must be going. These two men had one powerful sentiment in common: they loved the same woman. Mr. Curtenty, aged twenty-six in heart, thirty-six in mind, and forty-six in looks, was fifty-six only in years. He was a rich man; he had made money as an earthenware manufacturer in the good old times before Satan was ingenious enough to invent German competition, American tariffs, and the price of coal; he was still making money with the aid of his son

Harry, who now managed the works, but he never admitted that he was making it. No one has yet succeeded, and no one ever will succeed, in catching an earthenware manufacturer in the act of making money; he may confess with a sigh that he has performed the feat in the past, he may give utterance to a vague, preposterous hope that he will perform it again in the remote future, but as for surprising him in the very act, you would as easily surprise a hen laying an egg. Nowadays Mr. Curtenty, commercially secure, spent most of his energy in helping to shape and control the high destinies of the town. He was Deputy-Mayor, and Chairman of the General Purposes Committee of the Town Council; he was also a Guardian of the Poor, a Justice of the Peace, President of the Society for the Prosecution of Felons, a sidesman, an Oddfellow, and several other things that meant dining, shrewdness, and good-nature. He was a short, stiff, stout, red-faced man, jolly with the jollity that springs from a kind heart, a humorous disposition, a perfect digestion, and the respectful deference of one's bank-manager. Without being a member of the Browning Society, he held firmly to the belief that all's right with the world.

Mr. Gordon, who has but a sorry part in the drama, was a younger, quieter, less forceful person, rather shy; a municipal mediocrity, perhaps a little inflated that day by reason of his having been elected to the Chairmanship of the Gas and Lighting Committee.

Both men had sat on their committees at the Town Hall across the way that deceitful afternoon, and we see them now, after refreshment well earned and consumed, about to separate and sink into private life. But as they came out into the portico of the Tiger, the famous Calypso-like barmaid of the Tiger a hovering enchantment in the background, it occurred that a flock of geese were meditating, as geese will, in the middle of the road. The gooseherd, a shabby middle-aged man, looked as though he had recently lost the Battle of Marathon, and was asking himself whether the path of his retreat might not lie through the bar-parlour of the Tiger.

"Business pretty good?" Mr. Curtenty enquired of him cheerfully.

In the Five Towns business takes the place of weather as a topic of salutation.

"Business!" echoed the gooseherd.

In that one unassisted noun, scorning the aid of verb, adjective, or adverb, the gooseherd, by a masterpiece of profound and subtle emphasis, contrived to express the fact that he existed in a world of dead illusions, that he had become a convert to Schopenhauer, and that Mr. Curtenty's inapposite geniality was a final grievance to him.

"There ain't no business!" he added.

"Ah!" returned Mr. Curtenty, thoughtful: such an assertion of the entire absence of business was a reflection upon the town.

"Sithee!" said the gooseherd in ruthless accents, "I druv these 'ere geese into this 'ere town this

morning." (Here he exaggerated the number of miles traversed.) "Twelve geese and two gander — a Brent and a Barnacle. And how many is there now? How many?"

"Fourteen," said Mr. Gordon, having counted; and Mr. Curtenty gazed at him in reproach, for that he, a Town Councillor, had thus mathematically demonstrated the commercial decadence of Bursley.

"Market overstocked, eh?" Mr. Curtenty suggested, throwing a side-glance at Callear the poulterer's close by, which was crammed with everything that flew, swam, or waddled.

"Call this a market?" said the gooseherd. "I'st tak' my lot over to Hanbridge, wheer there *is* a bit doing, by all accounts."

Now, Mr. Curtenty had not the least intention of buying those geese, but nothing could be better calculated to straighten the back of a Bursley man than a reference to the mercantile activity of Hanbridge, that Chicago of the Five Towns.

"How much for the lot?" he enquired.

In that moment he reflected upon his reputation; he knew that he was a cure, a card, a character; he knew that everyone would think it just like Jos Curtenty, the renowned Deputy-Mayor of Bursley, to stand on the steps of the Tiger and pretend to chaffer with a gooseherd for a flock of geese. His imagination caught the sound of an oft-repeated inquiry, "Did ye hear about old Jos's latest — trying to buy them there geese?" and the appreciative laughter that would follow.

The gooseherd faced him in silence.

"Well," said Mr. Curtenty again, his eyes twinkling, "how much for the lot?"

The gooseherd gloomily and suspiciously named a sum.

Mr. Curtenty named a sum startlingly less, ending in sixpence.

"I'll tak' it," said the gooseherd, in a tone that closed on the bargain like a vice.

The Deputy-Mayor perceived himself the owner of twelve geese and two ganders — one Brent, one Barnacle. It was a shock, but he sustained it. Involuntarily he looked at Mr. Gordon.

"How are you going to get 'em home, Curtenty?" asked Gordon, with coarse sarcasm; "drive 'em?"

Nettled, Mr. Curtenty retorted:

"Now, then, Gas Gordon!"

The barmaid laughed aloud at this sobriquet, which that same evening was all over the town, and which has stuck ever since to the Chairman of the Gas and Lighting Committee. Mr. Gordon wished, and has never ceased to wish, either that he had been elected to some other committee, or that his name had begun with some other letter.

The gooseherd received the purchase-money like an affront, but when Mr. Curtenty, full of private mirth, said, "Chuck us your stick in," he gave him the stick, and smiled under reservation. Jos Curtenty had no use for the geese; he could conceive no purpose which they might be made to serve, no smallest corner for them in his universe. Neverthe-

less, since he had rashly stumbled into a ditch, he determined to emerge from it grandly, impressively, magnificently. He instantaneously formed a plan by which he would snatch victory out of defeat. He would take Gordon's suggestion, and himself drive the geese up to his residence in Hillport, that lofty and aristocratic suburb. It would be an immense, an unparalleled farce; a wonder, a topic for years, the crown of his reputation as a card.

He announced his intention with that misleading sobriety and ordinariness of tone which it has been the foible of many great humorists to assume. Mr. Gordon lifted his head several times very quickly, as if to say, "What next?" and then actually departed, which was a clear proof that the man had no imagination and no soul.

The gooseherd winked.

"You be rightly called 'Curtenty,' mester," said he, and passed into the Tiger.

"That's the best joke I ever heard," Jos said to himself. "I wonder whether he saw it."

Then the procession of the geese and the Deputy-Mayor commenced. Now, it is not to be assumed that Mr. Curtenty was necessarily bound to look foolish in the driving of geese. He was no nincompoop. On the contrary, he was one of those men who, bringing common-sense and presence of mind to every action of their lives, do nothing badly, and always escape the ridiculous. He marshalled his geese with notable gumption, adopted towards them exactly the correct stress of persuasion, and presently

he smiled to see them preceding him in the direction of Hillport. He looked neither to right nor left, but simply at his geese, and thus the quidnuncs of the market-place and the supporters of shop-fronts were unable to catch his eye. He tried to feel like a gooseherd; and such was his histrionic quality, his instinct for the dramatic, he *was* a gooseherd, despite his blue Melton overcoat, his hard felt hat with the flattened top, and that opulent-curving collar which was the secret despair of the young dandies of Hillport. He had the most natural air in the world. The geese were the victims of this imaginative effort of Mr. Curtenty's. They took him seriously as a gooseherd. These fourteen intelligences, each with an object in life, each bent on self-aggrandisement and the satisfaction of desires, began to follow the line of least resistance in regard to the superior intelligence unseen but felt behind them, feigning, as geese will, that it suited them so to submit, and that in reality they were still quite independent. But in the peculiar eye of the Barnacle gander, who was leading, an observer with sufficient fancy might have deciphered a mild revolt against this triumph of the absurd, the accidental, and the futile; a passive yet Promethean spiritual defiance of the supreme powers.

Mr. Curtenty got his fourteen intelligences safely across the top of St. Luke's Square, and gently urged them into the steep defile of Oldcastle Street. By this time rumour had passed in front of him and run off down side-streets like water let into an irrigation system. At every corner was a knot of people,

at most windows a face. And the Deputy-Mayor never spoke nor smiled. The farce was enormous; the memory of it would survive revolutions and religions.

Half-way down Oldcastle Street the first disaster happened. Electric tramways had not then knitted the Five Towns in a network of steel; but the last word of civilisation and refinement was about to be uttered, and a gang of men were making patterns with wires on the skyscape of Oldcastle Street. One of the wires, slipping from its temporary gripper, swirled with an extraordinary sound into the roadway, and writhed there in spirals. Several of Mr. Curtenty's geese were knocked down, and rose obviously annoyed; but the Barnacle gander fell with a clinging circle of wire round his muscular, glossy neck, and did not rise again. It was a violent, mysterious, agonising, and sudden death for him, and must have confirmed his theories about the arbitrariness of things. The thirteen passed pitilessly on. Mr. Curtenty freed the gander from the coiling wire, and picked it up, but, finding it far too heavy to carry, he handed it to a Corporation road-sweeper.

"I'll send for it," he said; "wait here."

These were the only words uttered by him during a memorable journey.

The second disaster was that the deceitful afternoon turned to rain — cold, cruel rain, persistent rain, full of sinister significance. Mr. Curtenty ruefully raised the velvet of his Melton. As he did so a brougham rolled into Oldcastle Street, a little in

front of him, from the direction of St. Peter's Church, and vanished towards Hillport. He knew the carriage; he had bought it and paid for it. Deep, far down, in his mind stirred the thought:

"I'm just the least bit glad she didn't see me."

He had the suspicion, which recurs even to optimists, that happiness is after all a chimera.

The third disaster was that the sun set and darkness descended. Mr. Curtenty had, unfortunately, not reckoned with this diurnal phenomenon; he had not thought upon the undesirability of being under compulsion to drive geese by the sole illumination of gas-lamps lighted by Corporation gas.

After this disasters multiplied. Dark and the rain had transformed the farce into something else. It was five-thirty when at last he reached The Firs, and the garden of The Firs was filled with lamentable complainings of a remnant of geese. His man Pond met him with a stable-lantern.

"Damp, sir," said Pond.

"Oh, nowt to speak of," said Mr. Curtenty, and, taking off his hat, he shot the fluid contents of the brim into Pond's face. It was his way of dotting the "i" of irony. "Missis come in?"

"Yes, sir; I have but just rubbed the horse down."

So far no reference to the surrounding geese, all forlorn in the heavy winter rain.

"I've gotten a two-three geese and one gander here for Christmas," said Mr. Curtenty after a pause. To inferiors he always used the dialect.

"Yes, sir."

"Turn 'em into th' orchard, as you call it."

"Yes, sir."

"They aren't all here. Thou mun put th' horse in the trap and fetch the rest thysen."

"Yes, sir."

"One's dead. A roadman's takkin' care on it in Oldcastle Street. He'll wait for thee. Give him sixpence."

"Yes, sir."

"There's another got into th' cut [canal]."

"Yes, sir."

"There's another strayed on the railway-line — happen it's run over by this."

"Yes, sir."

"And one's making the best of her way to Oldcastle. I couldna coax her in here."

"Yes, sir."

"Collect 'em."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Curtenty walked away towards the house.

"Mester!" Pond called after him, flashing the lantern.

"Well, lad?"

"There's no gander i' this lot."

"Hast forgotten to count thysen?" Mr. Curtenty answered blithely from the shelter of the side-door.

But within himself he was a little crest-fallen to think that the surviving gander should have escaped his vigilance, even in the darkness. He had set out to drive the geese home, and he had driven them

home, most of them. He had kept his temper, his dignity, his cheerfulness. He had got a bargain in geese. So much was indisputable ground for satisfaction. And yet the feeling of an anticlimax would not be dismissed. Upon the whole, his transit lacked glory. It had begun in splendour, but it had ended in discomfort and almost ignominy. Nevertheless, Mr. Curtenty's unconquerable soul asserted itself in a quite genuine and tuneful whistle as he entered the house.

The fate of the Brent gander was never ascertained.

II

The dining-room of The Firs was a spacious and inviting refectory, which owed nothing of its charm to William Morris, Regent Street, or the Arts and Crafts Society. Its triple aim was richness, solidity, and comfort, but especially comfort; and this aim was achieved in new oak furniture of immovable firmness, in a Turkey carpet which swallowed up the feet like a feather bed, and in large oil-paintings, whose darkly-glinting frames were a guarantee of their excellence. On a winter's night, as now, the room was at its richest, solidest, most comfortable. The blue plush curtains were drawn on their stout brass rods across door and French window. Finest selected silkstone fizzed and flamed in a patent grate which had the extraordinary gift of radiating heat into the apartment instead of up the chimney. The shaded Welsbach lights of the chandelier cast a

dazzling luminance on the tea-table of snow and silver, while leaving the pictures in a gloom so discreet that not Ruskin himself could have decided whether these were by Whistler or Peter Paul Rubens. On either side of the marble mantelpiece were two easy chairs of an immense, incredible capacity, chairs of crimson plush for Titans, chairs softer than moss, more pliant than a loving heart, more enveloping than a caress. In one of these chairs, that to the left of the fireplace, Mr. Curtenty was accustomed to snore every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, and almost every evening. The other was usually empty, but to-night it was occupied by Mrs. Curtenty, the jewel of the casket. In the presence of her husband she always used a small rocking-chair of ebonised cane.

To glance at this short, slight, yet plump little creature as she reclined crosswise in the vast chair, leaving great spaces of the seat unfilled, was to think rapturously to one's self: *This is a woman.* Her fluffy head was such a dot against the back of the chair, the curve of her chubby ringed hand above the head was so adorable, her black eyes were so provocative, her slippered feet so wee — yes, and there was something so mysteriously thrilling about the fall of her skirt that you knew instantly her name was Clara, her temper both fiery and obstinate, and her personality distracting. You knew that she was one of those women of frail physique who can endure fatigues that would destroy a camel; one of those dæmonic women capable of doing without sleep

for ten nights in order to nurse you; capable of dying and seeing you die rather than give way about the tint of a necktie; capable of laughter and tears simultaneously; capable of never being in the wrong except for the idle whim of so being. She had a big mouth and very wide nostrils, and her years were thirty-five. It was no matter; it would have been no matter had she been a hundred and thirty-five. In short . . .

Clara Curtenty wore tight-fitting black silk, with a long gold chain that descended from her neck nearly to her waist, and was looped up in the middle to an old-fashioned gold brooch. She was in mourning for a distant relative. Black pre-eminently suited her. Consequently her distant relatives died at frequent intervals.

The basalt clock on the mantelpiece trembled and burst into the song of six. Clara Curtenty rose swiftly from the easy-chair, and took her seat in front of the tea-tray. Almost at the same moment a neat black-and-white parlour-maid brought in teapot, copper kettle, and a silver-covered dish containing hot pikelets; then departed. Clara was alone again; not the same Clara now, but a personage demure, prim, precise, frightfully upright of back — a sort of impregnable stronghold — without doubt a Deputy-Mayoress.

At five past six Josiah Curtenty entered the room, radiant from a hot bath, and happy in dry clothes — a fine, if mature, figure of a man. His presence filled the whole room.

"Well, my chuck!" he said, and kissed her on the cheek.

She gazed at him with a look that might mean anything. Did she raise her cheek to his greeting, or was it fancy that she had endured, rather than accepted, his kiss? He was scarcely sure. And if she had endured instead of accepting the kiss, was her mood to be attributed to his lateness for tea, or to the fact that she was aware of the episode of the geese? He could not divine.

"Pikelets! Good!" he exclaimed, taking the cover off the dish.

This strong, successful, and dominant man adored his wife, and went in fear of her. She was his first love, but his second spouse. They had been married ten years. In those ten years they had quarrelled only five times, and she had changed the very colour of his life. Till his second marriage he had boasted that he belonged to the people and retained the habits of the people. Clara, though she also belonged to the people, very soon altered all that. Clara had a passion for the genteel. Like many warm-hearted, honest, clever, and otherwise sensible persons, Clara was a snob, but a charming little snob. She ordered him to forget that he belonged to the people. She refused to listen when he talked in the dialect. She made him dress with opulence, and even with tidiness; she made him buy a fashionable house and fill it with fine furniture; she made him buy a brougham in which her gentility could pay calls and do shopping (she shopped in Oldcastle, where a

decrepit aristocracy of tradesmen sneered at Hanbridge's lack of style); she had her "day"; she taught the servants to enter the reception-rooms without knocking; she took tea in bed in the morning, and tea in the afternoon in the drawing-room. She would have instituted dinner at seven, but she was a wise woman, and realised that too much tyranny often means revolution and the crumbling of thrones; therefore the ancient plebeian custom of high tea at six was allowed to persist and continue.

She it was who had compelled Josiah (or bewitched, beguiled, coaxed and wheedled him), after a public refusal, to accept the unusual post of Deputy-Mayor. In two years' time he might count on being Mayor. Why, then, should Clara have been so anxious for this secondary dignity? Because, in that year of royal festival, Bursley, in common with many other boroughs, had had a fancy to choose a Mayor out of the House of Lords. The Earl of Chell, a magnate of the county, had consented to wear the mayoral chain and dispense the mayoral hospitalities on condition that he was provided with a deputy for daily use.

It was the idea of herself being deputy to the lovely, meddlesome, and arrogant Countess of Chell that had appealed to Clara.

The deputy of a Countess at length spoke.

"Will Harry be late at the works again to-night?" she asked in her colder, small-talk manner, which committed her to nothing, as Josiah well knew.

Her way of saying that word "Harry" was inimi-

tably significant. She gave it an air. She liked Harry, and she liked Harry's name, because it had a Kensingtonian sound. Harry, so accomplished in business, was also a dandy, and he was a dog. "My stepson" — she loved to introduce him, so tall, manly, distinguished, and dandiacal. Harry, enriched by his own mother, belonged to a London club; he ran down to Llandudno for week-ends; and it was reported that he had been behind the scenes at the Alhambra. Clara felt for the word "Harry" the unreasoning affection which most women lavish on "George."

"Like as not," said Josiah. "I haven't been to the works this afternoon."

Another silence fell, and then Josiah, feeling himself unable to bear any further suspense as to his wife's real mood and temper, suddenly determined to tell her all about the geese, and know the worst. And precisely at the instant that he opened his mouth, the maid opened the door and announced:

"Mr. Duncalf wishes to see you at once, sir. He won't keep you a minute."

"Ask him in here, Mary," said the Deputy-Mayoress sweetly; "and bring another cup and saucer."

Mr. Duncalf was the Town Clerk of Bursley: legal, portly, dry, and a little shy.

"I won't stop, Curtenty. How d'ye do, Mrs. Curtenty? No, thanks, really ——" But she, smiling, exquisitely gracious, flattered and smoothed him into a chair.

"Any interesting news, Mr. Duncalf?" she said, and added: "But we're glad that *anything* should have brought you in."

"Well," said Duncalf, "I've just had a letter by the afternoon post from Lord Chell."

"Oh, the Earl! Indeed; how very interesting."

"What's he after?" inquired Josiah cautiously.

"He says he's just been appointed Governor of East Australia — announcement'll be in to-morrow's papers — and so he must regretfully resign the mayoralty. Says he'll pay the fine, but of course we shall have to remit that by special resolution of the Council."

"Well, I'm damned!" Josiah exclaimed.

"Topham!" Mrs. Curtenty remonstrated, but with a delightful acquitting dimple. She never would call him Josiah, much less Jos. Topham came more easily to her lips, and sometimes Top.

"Your husband," said Mr. Duncalf impressively to Clara, "will, of course, have to step into the Mayor's shoes, and you'll have to fill the place of the Countess." He paused, and added: "And very well you'll do it, too — very well. Nobody better."

The Town Clerk frankly admired Clara.

"Mr. Duncalf — Mr. Duncalf!" She raised a finger at him. "You are the most shameless flatterer in the town."

The flatterer was flattered. Having delivered the weighty news, he had leisure to savour his own importance as the bearer of it. He drank a cup of tea.

Josiah was thoughtful, but Clara brimmed over with a fascinating loquacity. Then Mr. Duncalf said that he must really be going, and, having arranged with the Mayor-elect to call a special meeting of the Council at once, he did go, all the while wishing he had the enterprise to stay.

Josiah accompanied him to the front-door. The sky had now cleared.

"Thank ye for calling," said the host.

"Oh, that's all right. Good-night, Curtenty. Got that goose out of the canal?"

So the story was all abroad!

Josiah returned to the dining-room, imperceptibly smiling. At the door the sight of his wife halted him. The face of that precious and adorable woman flamed out lightning and all menace and offence. Her louring eyes showed what a triumph of dissimulation she must have achieved in the presence of Mr. Duncalf, but now she could speak her mind.

"Yes, Topham!" she exploded, as though finishing an harangue. "And on this day of all days you choose to drive geese in the public road behind my carriage!"

Jos was stupefied, annihilated.

"Did you see me, then, Clarry?"

He vainly tried to carry it off.

"Did I see you? Of course I saw you!"

She withered him up with the hot wind of scorn.

"Well," he said foolishly, "how was I to know that the Earl would resign just to-day?"

"How were you to ——?"

Harry came in for his tea. He glanced from one to the other, discreet, silent. On the way home he had heard the tale of the geese in seven different forms. The Deputy-Mayor, so soon to be Mayor, walked out of the room.

"Pond has just come back, father," said Harry; "I drove up the hill with him."

And as Josiah hesitated a moment in the hall, he heard Clara exclaim, "Oh, Harry!"

"Damn!" he murmured.

III

The *Signal* of the following day contained the announcement which Mr. Duncalf had forecast; it also stated, on authority, that Mr. Josiah Curtenty would wear the mayoral chain of Bursley immediately, and added as its own private opinion that, in default of the Right Honourable the Earl of Chell and his Countess, no better "civic heads" could have been found than Mr. Curtenty and his charming wife. So far the tone of the *Signal* was unimpeachable. But underneath all this was a sub-title, "Amusing Exploit of the Mayor-elect," followed by an amusing description of the procession of the geese, a description which concluded by referring to Mr. Curtenty as His Worship the Goosedriver.

Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, and Turnhill laughed heartily, and perhaps a little viciously, at this paragraph, but Bursley was annoyed by it. In print the affair did not look at all well. Bursley prided itself on possessing a unique dignity as the

"Mother of the Five Towns," and to be presided over by a goosedriver, however humorous and hospitable he might be, did not consort with that dignity. A certain Mayor of Longshaw, years before, had driven a sow to market, and derived a tremendous advertisement therefrom, but Bursley had no wish to rival Longshaw in any particular, Bursley regarded Longshaw as the Inferno of the Five Towns. In Bursley you were bidden to go to Longshaw as you were bidden to go to . . . Certain acute people in Hillport saw nothing but a paralysing insult in the opinion of the *Signal* (first and foremost a Hanbridge organ), that Bursley could find no better civic head than Josiah Curtenty. At least three Aldermen and seven Councillors privately and in the Tiger, disagreed with any such view of Bursley's capacity to find heads.

And underneath all this brooding dissatisfaction lurked the thought, as the alligator lurks in a muddy river, that "the Earl wouldn't like it" — meaning the geese episode. It was generally felt that the Earl had been badly treated by Jos Curtenty. The town could not explain its sentiments — could not argue about them. They were not, in fact, capable of logical justification; but they were there, they violently existed. It would have been useless to point out that if the inimitable Jos had not been called to the mayoralty the episode of the geese would have passed as a gorgeous joke; that everyone had been vastly amused by it until that desolating issue of the *Signal* announced the Earl's retirement; that Jos

Curtenty could not possibly have foreseen what was about to happen; and that, anyhow, goose-driving was less a crime than a social solecism, and less a social solecism than a brilliant eccentricity. Bursley was hurt, and logic is no balm for wounds.

Some may ask: If Bursley was offended, why did it not mark its sense of Josiah's failure to read the future by electing another Mayor? The answer is, that while all were agreed that his antic was inexcusable, all were equally agreed to pretend that it was a mere trifle of no importance; you cannot deprive a man of his prescriptive right for a mere trifle of no importance. Besides, nobody could be so foolish as to imagine that goosedriving, though reprehensible in a Mayor about to succeed an Earl, is an act of which official notice can be taken.

The most curious thing in the whole imbroglio is that Josiah Curtenty secretly agreed with his wife and the town. He was ashamed, overset. His procession of geese appeared to him in an entirely new light, and he had the strength of mind to admit to himself, " I've made a fool of myself."

Harry went to London for a week, and Josiah, under plea of his son's absence, spent eight hours a day at the works. The brougham remained in the coach-house.

The Town Council duly met in special conclave, and Josiah Topham Curtenty became Mayor of Bursley.

Shortly after Christmas it was announced that the Mayor and Mayoress had decided to give a New

Year's treat to four hundred poor old people in the St. Luke's covered market. It was also spread about that this treat would eclipse and extinguish all previous treats of a similar nature, and that it might be accepted as some slight foretaste of the hospitality which the Mayor and Mayoress would dispense in that memorable year of royal festival. The treat was to occur on January 9, the Mayoress's birthday.

On January 7 Josiah happened to go home early. He was proceeding into the drawing-room without enthusiasm to greet his wife, when he heard voices within; and one voice was the voice of Gas Gordon.

Jos stood still. It has been mentioned that Gordon and the Mayor were in love with the same woman. The Mayor had easily captured her under the very guns of his not formidable rival, and he had always thereafter felt a kind of benevolent, good-humoured, contemptuous pity for Gordon — Gordon, whose life was a tragic blank; Gordon, who lived, a melancholy and defeated bachelor, with his mother and two unmarried sisters older than himself. That Gordon still worshipped at the shrine did not disturb him; on the contrary, it pleased him. Poor Gordon!

"But, really, Mrs. Curtenty," Gordon was saying —"really, you know I — that — is — really ——"

"To please me!" Mrs. Curtenty entreated, with a seductive charm that Jos felt even outside the door.

Then there was a pause.

"Very well," said Gordon.

Mr. Curtenty tiptoed away and back into the

street. He walked in the dark nearly to Oldcastle, and returned about six o'clock. But Clara said no word of Gordon's visit. She had scarcely spoken to Topham for three weeks.

The next morning, as Harry was departing to the works, Mrs. Curtenty followed the handsome youth into the hall.

"Harry," she whispered, "bring me two ten-pound notes this afternoon, will you, and say nothing to your father."

IV

Gas Gordon was to be on the platform at the poor people's treat. As he walked down Trafalgar Road his eye caught a still-exposed fragment of a decayed bill on a hoarding. It referred to a meeting of the local branch of the Anti-Gambling League a year ago in the lecture-hall of the Wesleyan Chapel, and it said that Councillor Gordon would occupy the chair on that occasion. Mechanically Councillor Gordon stopped and tore the fragment away from the hoarding.

The treat, which took the form of a dinner, was an unqualified success; it surpassed all expectations. Even the diners themselves were satisfied — a rare thing at such affairs. Goose was a prominent item in the menu. After the repast the replete guests were entertained from the platform, the Mayor being, of course, in the chair. Harry sang "In Old Madrid," accompanied by his stepmother, with faultless expression. Mr. Duncalf astonished every-

body with the famous North-Country recitation, "The Patent Hair-brushing Mashane." There were also a banjo solo, a skirt dance of discretion, and a campanological turn. At last, towards ten o'clock, Mr. Gordon, who had hitherto done nothing, rose in his place, amid good-natured cries of "Gas!"

"I feel sure you will all agree with me," he began, "that this evening would not be complete without a vote of thanks — a very hearty vote of thanks — to our excellent host and chairman."

Ear-splitting applause.

"I've got a little story to tell you," he continued —"a story that up to this moment has been a close secret between his Worship the Mayor and myself." His Worship looked up sharply at the speaker. "You've heard about some geese, I reckon. (*Laughter.*) Well, you've not heard all, but I'm going to tell you. I can't keep it to myself any longer. You think his Worship drove those geese — I hope they're digesting well (*loud laughter*) — just for fun. He didn't. I was with him when he bought them, and I happened to say that goose-driving was a very difficult accomplishment."

"Depends on the geese!" shouted a voice.

"Yes, it does," Mr. Gordon admitted. "Well, his Worship contradicted me, and we had a bit of an argument. I don't bet, as you know — at least, not often — but I don't mind confessing that I offered to bet him a sovereign he couldn't drive his geese half a mile. 'Look here, Gordon,' he said

to me: 'there's a lot of distress in the town just now — trade bad, and so on, and so on. I'll lay you a level ten pounds I drive these geese to Hillport myself, the loser to give the money to charity.' 'Done,' I said. 'Don't say anything about it,' he says. 'I won't,' I says — but I am doing. (*Applause.*) I feel it my duty to say something about it. (*More applause.*) Well, I lost, as you all know. He drove 'em to Hillport. ('*Good old Jos!*') That's not all. The Mayor insisted on putting his own ten pounds to mine and making it twenty. Here are the two identical notes, his and mine." Mr. Gordon waved the identical notes amid an uproar. "We've decided that everyone who has dined here to-night shall receive a brand-new shilling. I see Mr. Septimus Lovatt from the bank there with a bag. He will attend to you as you go out. (*Wild outbreak and tumult of rapturous applause.*) And now three cheers for your Mayor — and Mayoress!"

It was colossal, the enthusiasm.

"*And* for Gas Gordon!" called several voices.

The cheers rose again in surging waves.

Everyone remarked that the Mayor, usually so imperturbable, was quite overcome — seemed as if he didn't know where to look.

Afterwards, as the occupants of the platform descended, Mr. Gordon glanced into the eyes of Mrs. Curtenty, and found there his exceeding reward. The mediocrity had blossomed out that evening into something new and strange. Liar, delib-

erate liar and self-accused gambler as he was, he felt that he had lived during that speech; he felt that it was the supreme moment of his life.

"What a perfectly wonderful man your husband is!" said Mrs. Duncalf to Mrs. Curtenty.

Clara turned to her husband with a sublime gesture of satisfaction. In the brougham, going home, she bewitched him with wifely endearments. She could afford to do so. The stigma of the geese episode was erased.

But the barmaid of the Tiger, as she let down her bright hair that night in the attic of the Tiger, said to herself, "Well, of all the ——" Just that.

THE IDIOT

WILLIAM FROYLE, ostler at the Queen's Arms at Moorthorne, took the letter, and, with a curt nod which stifled the loquacity of the village postman, went at once from the yard into the coach-house. He had recognised the hand-writing on the envelope, and the recognition of it gave form and quick life to all the vague suspicions that had troubled him some months before, and again during the last few days. He felt suddenly the near approach of a frightful calamity which had long been stealing towards him.

A wire-sheathed lantern, set on a rough oaken table, cast a wavering light round the coach-house, and dimly showed the inner stable. Within the latter could just be distinguished the mottled-grey flanks of a fat cob which dragged its chain occasionally, making the large slow movements of a horse comfortably lodged in its stall. The pleasant odour of animals and hay filled the wide spaces of the shed, and through the half-open door came a fresh thin mist rising from the rain-soaked yard in the November evening.

Froyle sat down on the oaken table, his legs dangling, and looked again at the envelope before

opening it. He was a man about thirty years of age, with a serious and thoughtful, rather heavy countenance. He had a long light moustache, and his skin was a fresh, rosy salmon colour; his straw-tinted hair was cut very short, except over the forehead, where it grew full and bushy. Dressed in his rough stable corduroys, his forearms bare and white, he had all the appearance of the sturdy Englishman, the sort of Englishman that crosses the world in order to find vent for his taciturn energy on virgin soils. From the whole village he commanded and received respect. He was known for a scholar, and it was his scholarship which had obtained for him the proud position of secretary to the provident society styled the Queen's Arms Slate Club. His respectability and his learning combined had enabled him to win with dignity the hand of Susie Trimmer, the grocer's daughter, to whom he had been engaged about a year. The village could not make up its mind concerning that match; without doubt it was a social victory for Froyle, but everyone wondered that so sedate and sagacious a man should have seen in Susie a suitable mate.

He tore open the envelope with his huge forefinger, and, bending down towards the lantern, began to read the letter. It ran:

"OLDCASTLE STREET, BURSLEY.

"*Dear Will:*

"I asked father to tell you, but he would not. He said I must write. Dear Will, I hope you will

never see me again. As you will see by the above address, I am now at Aunt Penrose's at Bursley. She is awful angry, but I was obliged to leave the village because of my shame. I have been a wicked girl. It was in July. You know the man, because you asked me about him one Sunday night. He is no good. He is a villain. Please forget all about me. I want to go to London. So many people know me here, and what with people coming in from the village, too. Please forgive me.

"S. TRIMMER."

After reading the letter a second time, Froyle folded it up and put it in his pocket. Beyond a slight unaccustomed pallor of the red cheeks, he showed no sign of emotion. Before the arrival of the postman he had been cleaning his master's bicycle, which stood against the table. To this he returned. Kneeling down in some fresh straw, he used his dusters slowly and patiently — rubbing, then stopping to examine the result, and then rubbing again. When the machine was polished to his satisfaction, he wheeled it carefully into the stable, where it occupied a stall next to that of the cob. As he passed back again, the animal leisurely turned his head and gazed at Froyle with its large liquid eyes. He slapped the immense flank. Content, the animal returned to its feed, and the weighted chain ran down with a rattle.

The fortnightly meeting of the Slate Club was to take place at eight o'clock that evening. Froyle had

employed part of the afternoon in making ready his books for the event, to him always so solemn and ceremonious; and the affairs of the club were now prominent in his mind. He was sorry that it would be impossible for him to attend the meeting; fortunately, all the usual preliminaries were complete.

He took a piece of notepaper from a little hanging cupboard, and, sprawling across the table, began to write under the lantern. The pencil seemed a tiny toy in his thick roughened fingers:

"*To Mr. Andrew McCall, Chairman Queen's Arms Slate Club.*

"DEAR SIR: I regret to inform you that I shall not be at the meeting to-night. You will find the books in order . . ."

Here he stopped, biting the end of the pencil in thought. He put down the pencil and stepped hastily out of the stable, across the yard, and into the hotel. In the large room, the room where cyclists sometimes took tea and cold meat during the summer season, the long deal table and the double line of oaken chairs stood ready for the meeting. A fire burnt warmly in the big grate, and the hanging lamp had been lighted. On the wall was a large card containing the rules of the club, which had been written out in a fair hand by the schoolmaster. It was to this card that Froyle went. Passing his thumb down the card, he paused at Rule VII.:

"Each member shall, on the death of another member, pay 1s. for benefit of widow or nominee of deceased, same to be paid within one month after notice given."

"Or nominee — nominee," he murmured reflectively, staring at the card. He mechanically noticed, what he had noticed often before with disdain, that the chairman had signed the rules without the use of capitals.

He went back to the dusk of the coach-house to finish his letter, still murmuring the word "nominee," of whose meaning he was not quite sure:

"I request that the money due to me from the Slate Club on my death shall be paid to my nominee, Miss Susan Trimmer, now staying with her aunt, Mrs. Penrose, at Bursley.

"Yours respectfully,

"WILLIAM FROYLE."

After further consideration he added:

"P. S.— My annual salary of sixpence per member would be due at the end of December. If so be the members would pay that, or part of it, should they consider the same due, to Susan Trimmer as well, I should be thankful.— Yours resp., W. F."

He put the letter in an envelope, and, taking it to the large room, laid it carefully at the end of the

table opposite the chairman's seat. Once more he returned to the coach-house. From the hanging cupboard he now produced a piece of rope. Standing on the table he could just reach, by leaning forward, a hook in the ceiling, that was sometimes used for the slinging of bicycles. With difficulty he made the rope fast to the hook. Putting a noose on the other end, he tightened it round his neck. He looked up at the ceiling and down at the floor in order to judge whether the rope was short enough.

"Good-bye, Susan, and everyone," he whispered, and then stepped off the table.

The tense rope swung him by his neck half-way across the coach-house. He swung twice to and fro, but as he passed under the hook for the fifth time his shoes touched the floor. The rope had stretched. In another second he was standing firm on the floor, purple and panting, but ignominiously alive.

"Good-even to you, Mr. Froyle. Be you committing suicide?" The tones were drawling, uncertain, mildly astonished.

He turned round hastily, his hands busy with the rope, and saw in the doorway the figure of Daft Jimmy, the Moorthorne idiot.

He hesitated before speaking, but he was not confused. No one could have been confused before Daft Jimmy. Neither man nor woman in the village considered his presence more than that of a cat.

"Yes, I am," he said.

The middle-aged idiot regarded him with a vague, interested smile, and came into the coach-house.

"You'n gotten the rope too long, Mr. Froyle. Let me help you."

Froyle calmly assented. He stood on the table, and the two rearranged the noose and made it secure. As they did so the idiot gossiped:

"I was going to Bursley to-night to buy me a pair o' boots, and when I was at top o' th' hill I remembered as I'd forgotten the measure o' my feet. So I ran back again for it. Then I saw the light in here, and I stepped up to bid ye good-evening."

Someone had told him the ancient story of the fool and his boots, and, with the pride of an idiot in his idiocy, he had determined that it should be related of himself.

Froyle was silent.

The idiot laughed with a dry cackle.

"Now you go," said Froyle, when the rope was fixed.

"Let me see ye do it," the idiot pleaded with pathetic eyes.

"No; out you get!"

Protesting, the idiot went forth, and his irregular clumsy footsteps sounded on the pebble-paved yard. When the noise of them ceased in the soft roadway, Froyle jumped off the table again. Gradually his body, like a stopping pendulum, came to rest under the hook, and hung twitching, with strange disconnected movements. The horse in the stable, hear-

ing unaccustomed noises, rattled his chain and stamped about in the straw of his box.

Furtive steps came down the yard again, and Daft Jimmy peeped into the coach-house.

"He done it! he done it!" the idiot cried gleefully. "Damned if he hasna'." He slapped his leg and almost danced. The body still twitched occasionally. "He done it!"

"Done what, Daft Jimmy? You're making a fine noise there! Done what?"

The idiot ran out of the stable. At the side-entrance to the hotel stood the barmaid, the outline of her fine figure distinct against the light from within.

The idiot continued to laugh.

"Done what?" the girl repeated, calling out across the dark yard in clear, pleasant tones of amused inquiry. "Done what?"

"What's that to you, Miss Tucker?"

"Now, none of your sauce, Daft Jimmy! Is Willie Froyle in there?"

The idiot roared with laughter.

"Yes, he is, miss."

"Well, tell him his master wants him. I don't want to cross this mucky, messy yard."

"Yes, miss."

The girl closed the door.

The idiot went into the coach-house, and, slapping William's body in a friendly way so that it trembled on the rope, he spluttered out between his laughs:

"Master wants ye, Mr. Froyle."

Then he walked out into the village street, and stood looking up the muddy road, still laughing quietly. It was quite dark, but the moon aloft in the clear sky showed the highway with its shining ruts leading in a straight line over the hill to Bursley.

"Them shoes!" the idiot ejaculated suddenly. "Well, I be an idiot, and that's true! They can take the measure from my feet, and I never thought on it till this minute!"

Laughing again, he set off at a run up the hill.

NOCTURNE AT THE MAJESTIC

I

IN the daily strenuous life of a great hotel there are periods during which its bewildering activities slacken, and the vast organism seems to be under the influence of an opiate. Such a period recurs after dinner when the guests are preoccupied by the mysterious processes of digestion in the drawing-rooms or smoking-rooms or in the stalls of a theatre. On the evening of this nocturne the well-known circular entrance-hall of the Majestic, with its tessellated pavement, its malachite pillars, its Persian rugs, its lounges, and its renowned stuffed bears at the foot of the grand stairway, was for the moment deserted, save by the head hall-porter and the head night-porter and the girl in the bureau. It was a quarter to nine, and the head hall-porter was abdicating his pagoda to the head night-porter, and telling him the necessary secrets of the day. These two lords, before whom the motley panorama of human existence was continually being enrolled, held a portentous confabulation night and morning. They had no illusions; they knew life. Shakespeare himself might have listened to them with advantage.

The girl in the bureau, like a beautiful and languishing animal in its cage, leaned against her window, and looked between two pillars at the magnificent lords. She was too far off to catch their talk, and, indeed, she watched them absently in a reverie induced by the sweet melancholy of the summer twilight, by the torpidity of the hour, and by the prospect of the next day, which was her day off. The liveried functionaries ignored her, probably scorned her as a mere pretty little morsel. Nevertheless, she was the centre of energy, not they. If money were payable, she was the person to receive it; if a customer wanted a room, she would choose it; and the lords had to call her "miss." The immense and splendid hotel pulsed round this simple heart hidden under a white blouse. Especially in summer, her presence and the presence of her companions in the bureau (but to-night she was alone) ministered to the satisfaction of male guests, whose cruel but profoundly human instincts found pleasure in the fact that, no matter when they came in from their wanderings, the pretty captives were always there in the bureau, smiling welcome, puzzling stupid little brains and puckering pale brows over enormous ledgers, twittering borrowed facetiousness from rosy mouths, and smoothing out seductive toilettes with long thin hands that were made for ring and bracelet and rudder-lines, and not a bit for the pen and the ruler.

The pretty little thing despised of the functionaries corresponded almost exactly in appearance to

the typical bureau girl. She was moderately tall; she had a good slim figure, all pleasant curves, flaxen hair and plenty of it, and a dainty, rather expressionless face; the ears and mouth were very small, the eyes large and blue, the nose so-so, the cheeks and forehead of an equal ivory pallor, the chin trifling, with a crease under the lower lip and a rich convexity springing out from below the crease. The extremities of the full lips were nearly always drawn up in a smile, mechanical, but infallibly attractive. The hair was of an orthodox frizziness. You would have said she was a nice, kind, good-natured girl, flirtatious but correct, well adapted to adorn a dogcart on Sundays.

This was Nina, foolish Nina, aged twenty-one. In her reverie the entire Hôtel Majestic weighed on her; she had a more than adequate sense of her own solitary importance in the bureau, and stirring obscurely beneath that consciousness were the deep ineradicable longings of a poor pretty girl for heaps of money, endless luxury of finery and chocolates, and sentimental silken dalliance.

Suddenly a stranger entered the hall. His advent seemed to wake the place out of the trance into which it had fallen. The nocturne had begun. Nina straightened herself and intensified her eternal smile. The two porters became military, and smiled with a special and peculiar urbanity. Several lesser but still lordly functionaries appeared among the pillars; a page-boy emerged by magic from the region of the chimney-piece like Mephistopheles in

Faust's study; and some guests of both sexes strolled chattering across the tessellated pavement as they passed from one wing of the hotel to the other.

"How do, Tom?" said the stranger, grasping the hand of the head hall-porter, and nodding to the head night-porter.

His voice showed that he was an American, and his demeanour that he was one of those experienced, wealthy, and kindly travellers who know the Christian names of all the hall-porters in the world, and have the trick of securing their intimacy and fealty. He wore a blue suit and a light grey wideawake, and his fine moustache was grizzled. In his left hand he carried a brown bag.

"Nicely, thank you, sir," Tom replied. "How are you, sir?"

"Oh, about six and six."

Whereupon both porters laughed heartily.

Tom escorted him to the bureau, and tried to relieve him of his bag. Inferior lords escorted Tom.

"I guess I'll keep the grip," said the stranger. "Mr. Pank will be around with some more baggage pretty soon. We've expressed the rest on to the steamer. Well, my dear," he went on, turning to Nina, "you're a fresh face here."

He looked her steadily in the eyes.

"Yes, I am," she said, conquered instantly.

Radiant and triumphant, the man brought good-humour into every face, like some wonderful combination of the sun and the sea-breeze.

"Give me two bedrooms and a parlour, please," he commanded.

"First floor?" asked Nina prettily.

"First floor! Well — I should say! *And* on the Strand, my dear."

She bent over her ledgers, blushing.

"Send someone to the 'phone, Tom, and let 'em put me on to the Regency, will you?" said the stranger.

"Yes, sir. Samuels, go ring up the Regency Theatre — quick!"

Swift departure of a lord.

"And ask Alphonse to come up to my bedroom in ten minutes from now," the stranger proceeded to Tom. "I shall want a dandy supper for fourteen at a quarter after eleven."

"Yes, sir. No dinner, sir?"

"No; we dined on the Pullman. Well, my dear, figured it out yet?"

"Numbers 102, 120, and 107," said Nina.

"Keys 102, 120, and 107," said Tom.

Swift departure of another lord to the pagoda.

"How much?" demanded the stranger.

"The bedrooms are twenty-five shillings, and the sitting-room two guineas."

"I guess Mr. Pank won't mind that. Hullo, Pank, you're here! I'm through. Your number's 102 or 120, which you fancy. Just going to the 'phone a minute, and then I'll join you upstairs."

Mr. Pank was a younger man, possessing a thin, astute, intellectual face. He walked into the hall

with noticeable deliberation. His travelling costume was faultless, but from beneath his straw hat his black hair sprouted in a somewhat peculiar fashion over his broad forehead. He smiled lazily and shrewdly, and without a word disappeared into a lift. Two large portmanteaus accompanied him.

Presently the elder stranger could be heard battling with the obstinate idiosyncrasies of a London telephone.

"You haven't registered," Nina called to him in her tremulous, delicate, captivating voice, as he came out of the telephone-box.

He advanced to sign, and, taking a pen and leaning on the front of the bureau, wrote in the visitor's book, in a careful, legible hand: "Lionel Belmont, New York." Having thus written, and still resting on the right elbow, he raised his right hand a little and waved the pen like a delicious menace at Nina.

"Mr. Pank hasn't registered, either," he said slowly, with a charming affectation of solemnity, as though accusing Mr. Pank of some appalling crime.

Nina laughed timidly as she pushed his room-ticket across the page of the big book. She thought that Mr. Lionel Belmont was perfectly delightful.

"No, he hasn't," she said, trying also to be arch; "but he must."

At that moment she happened to glance at the right hand of Mr. Belmont. In the brilliance of the electric light she could see the fair skin of the wrist and forearm within the whiteness of his shirt-

sleeve. She stared at what she saw, every muscle tense.

"I guess you can round up Mr. Pank yourself, my dear, later on," said Lionel Belmont, and turned quickly away, intent on the next thing.

He did not notice that her large eyes had grown larger and her pale face paler. In another moment the hall was deserted again. Mr. Belmont had ascended in the lift, Tom had gone to his rest, and the head night-porter was concealed in the pagoda. Nina sank down limply on her stool, her nostrils twitching; she feared she was about to faint, but this final calamity did not occur. She had, nevertheless, experienced the greatest shock of her brief life, and the way of it was thus.

II

Nina Malpas was born amid the embers of one of those fiery conjugal dramas which occur with romantic frequency in the provincial towns of the northern Midlands, where industrial conditions are such as to foster an independent spirit among women of the lower class generally, and where by long tradition "character" is allowed to exploit itself more freely than in the southern parts of our island. Lemuel Malpas was a dashing young commercial traveller, with what is known as "an agreeable address," in Bursley, one of the Five Towns, Staffordshire. On the strength of his dash he wooed and married the daughter of an hotel-keeper in the neighbouring town of Hanbridge. Six months after

the wedding — in other words, at the most dangerous period of the connubial career — Mrs. Malpas's father died, and Mrs. Malpas became the absolute mistress of eight thousand pounds. Lemuel * had carefully foreseen this windfall, and wished to use the money in enterprises of the earthenware trade. Mrs. Malpas, pretty and vivacious, with a self-conceit hardened by the adulation of saloon-bars, very decidedly thought otherwise. Her motto was, "What's yours is mine, but what's mine's my own." The difference was accentuated. Long mutual resistances were followed by reconciliations, which grew more and more transitory, and at length both recognised that the union, not founded on genuine affection, had been a mistake.

"Keep your d——d brass!" Lemuel exclaimed one morning, and he went off on a journey and forgot to come back. A curious letter dated from Liverpool wished his wife happiness, and informed her that, since she was well provided for, he had no scruples about leaving her. Mrs. Malpas was startled at first, but she soon perceived that what Lemuel had done was exactly what the brilliant and enterprising Lemuel might have been expected to do. She jerked up her doll's head, and ejaculated, "So much the better!"

A few weeks later she sold the furniture and took rooms in Scarborough, where, amid pleasurable surroundings, she determined to lead the joyous life of

* This name is pronounced with the accent on the first syllable in the Five Towns.

a grass-widow, free of all cares. Then, to her astonishment and disgust, Nina was born. She had not bargained for Nina. She found herself in the tiresome position of a mother whose explanations of her child lack plausibility. One lodging-house keeper to whom she hazarded the statement that Lemuel was in Australia had saucily replied: "I thought maybe it was the North Pole he was gone to!"

This decided Mrs. Malpas. She returned suddenly to the Five Towns, where at least her reputation was secure. Only a week previously Lemuel had learnt indirectly that she had left their native district. He determined thenceforward to forget her completely. Mrs. Malpas's prettiness was of the fleeting sort. After Nina's birth she began to get stout and coarse, and the nostalgia of the saloon-bar, the coffee-room, and the sanded portico overtook her. The Tiger at Bursley was for sale, a respectable commercial hotel, the best in the town. She purchased it, wines, omnibus connection, and all, and developed into the typical landlady in black silk and gold rings.

In the Tiger Nina was brought up. She was a pretty child from her earliest years, and received the caresses of all as a matter of course. She went to a good school, studied the piano, and learnt dancing, and at sixteen did her hair up. She did as she was told without fuss, being apparently of a lethargic temperament; she had all the money and all the clothes that her heart could desire; she was happy, and in a quiet way she deemed herself a rather con-

siderable item in the world. When she was eighteen her mother died miserably of cancer, and it was discovered that the liabilities of Mrs. Malpas's estate exceeded its assets — and the Tiger mortgaged up to its value! The creditors were not angry; they attributed the state of affairs to illness and the absence of male control, and good-humouredly accepted what they could get. None the less, Nina, the child of luxury and sloth, had to start life with several hundreds of pounds less than nothing. Of her father all trace had been long since lost. A place was found for her, and for over two years she saw the world from the office of a famous hotel in Doncaster. Her lethargy, and an invaluable gift of adapting herself to circumstances, saved her from any acute unhappiness in the Yorkshire town. Instinctively she ceased to remember the Tiger and past splendours. (Equally, if she had married a Duke instead of becoming a book-keeper, she would have ceased to remember the Tiger and past humility.) Then by good or ill fortune she had the offer of a situation at the Hôtel Majestic, Strand, London. The Majestic and the sights thereof woke up the sleeping soul.

Before her death Mrs. Malpas had told Nina many things about the vanished Lemuel; among others, the curious detail that he had two small moles — one hairless, the other hirsute — close together on the under side of his right wrist. Nina had seen precisely such marks of identification on the right wrist of Mr. Lionel Belmont.

She was convinced that Lionel Belmont was her father. There could not be two men in the world so stamped by nature. She perceived that in changing his name he had chosen Lionel because of its similarity to Lemuel. She felt certain, too, that she had noticed vestiges of the Five Towns accent beneath his Americanisms. But apart from these reasons, she knew by a superrational instinct that Lionel Belmont was her father; it was not the call of blood, but the positiveness of a woman asserting that a thing is so because she is sure it is so.

III

Nina was not of an imaginative disposition. The romance of this extraordinary encounter made no appeal to her. She was the sort of girl that constantly reads novelettes, and yet always, with fatigued scorn, refers to them as "silly." Stupid little Nina was intensely practical at heart, and it was the practical side of her father's reappearance that engaged her birdlike mind. She did not stop to reflect that truth is stranger than fiction. Her tiny heart was not agitated by any ecstatic ponderings upon the wonder and mystery of fate. She did not feel strangely drawn towards Lionel Belmont, nor did she feel that he supplied a something which had always been wanting to her.

On the other hand, her pride — and Nina was very proud — found much satisfaction in the fact that her father, having turned up, was so fine, handsome, dashing, good-humoured, and wealthy. It

was well, and excellently well, and delicious, to have a father like that. The possession of such a father opened up vistas of a future so enticing and glorious that her present career became instantly loathsome to her.

It suddenly seemed impossible that she could have tolerated the existence of a hotel clerk for a single week. Her eyes were opened, and she saw, as many women have seen, that luxury was an absolute necessity to her. All her ideas soared with the magic swiftness of the beanstalk. And at the same time she was terribly afraid, unaccountably afraid, to confront Mr. Belmont and tell him that she was his Nina; he was entirely unaware that he had a Nina.

"I'm your daughter! I know by your moles!"

She whispered the words in her tiny heart, and felt sure that she could never find courage to say them aloud to that great and important man. The announcement would be too monstrous, incredible, and absurd. People would laugh. He would laugh. And Nina could stand anything better than being laughed at. Even supposing she proved to him his paternity — she thought of the horridness of going to lawyers' offices — he might decline to recognise her. Or he might throw her fifty pounds a year, as one throws sixpence to an importunate crossing-sweeper, to be rid of her. The United States existed in her mind chiefly as a country of highly-remarkable divorce laws, and she thought that Mr. Belmont might have married again. A fashionable and arrogant Mrs. Belmont, and a dazzling

Miss Belmont, aged possibly eighteen, might arrive, both of them steeped in all conceivable luxury, at any moment. Where would Nina be then, with her two-and-eleven-pence-halfpenny blouse from Glave's? . . .

Mr. Belmont, accompanied by Alphonse, the head-waiter in the *salle à manger,* descended in the lift and crossed the hall to the portico, where he stood talking for a few seconds. Mr. Belmont turned, and, as he conversed with Alphonse, gazed absently in the direction of the bureau. He looked straight through the pretty captive. After all, despite his superficial heartiness, she could be nothing to him — so rich, assertive, and truly important. A hansom was called for him, and he departed; she observed that he was in evening dress now.

No! Her cause was just; but it was too startling — that was what was the matter with it.

Then she told herself she would write to Lionel Belmont. She would write a letter that night.

At nine-thirty she was off duty. She went upstairs to her perch in the roof, and sat on her bed for over two hours. Then she came down again to the bureau with some bluish note-paper and envelopes in her hand, and, in response to the surprised question of the pink-frocked colleague who had taken her place, she explained that she wanted to write a letter.

"You do look that bad, Miss Malpas," said the other girl, who made a speciality of compassion.

"Do I?" said Nina.

"Yes, you do. What have you got *on, now,* my poor dear?"

"What's that to you? I'll thank you to mind your own business, Miss Bella Perkins."

Usually Nina was not soon ruffled; but that night all her nerves were exasperated and exceedingly sensitive.

"Oh!" said the girl. "What price the Duchess of Doncaster? And I was just going to wish you a nice day to-morrow for your holiday, too."

Nina seated herself at the table to write the letter. An electric light burned directly over her frizzy head. She wrote a weak but legible and regular back-hand. She hated writing letters, partly because she was dubious about her spelling, and partly because of an obscure but irrepressible suspicion that letters were of necessity silly. She pondered for a long time, and then wrote: "Dear Mr. Belmont, — I venture ——" She made a new start: "Dear Sir,— I hope you will not think me ——" And a third attempt: "My dear Father ——" No! it was preposterous. It could no more be written than it could be said.

The situation was too much for simple Nina.

Suddenly the grand circular hall of the Majestic was filled with a clamour at once charming and fantastic. There was chattering of musical, gay American voices, pattering of elegant feet on the tessellated pavement, the unique incomparable sound of the *frou-frou* of many frocks; and above all this the rich tones of Mr. Lionel Belmont. Nina looked up

and saw her radiant father the centre of a group of girls all young, all beautiful, all stylish, all with picture hats, all self-possessed, all sparkling, doubtless the recipients of the dandy supper.

Oh, how insignificant and homicidal Nina felt!

"Thirteen of you!" exclaimed Lionel Belmont, pulling his superb moustache. "Two to a hansom. I guess I'll want six and a half hansoms, boy."

There was an explosion of delicious laughter, and the page-boy grinned, ran off, and began whistling in the portico like a vexed locomotive. The thirteen fair, shepherded by Lionel Belmont, passed out into the murmurous summer night of the Strand. Cab after cab drove up, and Nina saw that her father, after filling each cab, paid each cabman. In three minutes the dream-like scene was over. Mr. Belmont re-entered the hotel, winked humorously at the occupant of the pagoda, ignored the bureau, and departed to his rooms.

Nina ripped her inchoate letters into small pieces, and, with a tart good-night to Miss Bella Perkins, who was closing her ledgers, the hour being close upon twelve-thirty, she passed sedately, stiffly, as though in performance of some vestal's ritual, up the grand staircase. Turning to the right at the first landing, she traversed a long corridor which was no part of the route to her cubicle on the ninth floor. This corridor was lighted by glowing sparks, which hung on yellow cords from the central line of the ceiling; underfoot was a heavy but narrow crimson patterned carpet with a strip of polished oak

parquet on either side of it. Exactly along the central line of the carpet Nina tripped, languorously, like an automaton, and exactly over her head glittered the line of electric sparks. The corridor and the journey seemed to be interminable, and Nina on some inscrutable and mystic errand. At length she moved aside from the religious line, went into a service cabinet, and emerged with a small bunch of pass-keys. No. 107 was Lionel Belmont's sitting-room; No. 102, his bedroom, was opposite to 107. No. 108, another sitting-room, was, as Nina knew, unoccupied. She noiselessly let herself into No. 108, closed the door, and stood still. After a minute she switched on the light. These two rooms, Nos. 108 and 107, had once communicated, but, as space grew precious with the growing success of the Majestic, they had been finally separated, and the door between them locked and masked by furniture. By reason of the door, Nina could hear Lionel Belmont moving to and fro in No. 107. She listened a long time. Then, involuntarily, she yawned with fatigue.

"How silly of me to be here!" she thought. "What good will this do me?"

She extinguished the light and opened the door to leave. At the same instant the door of No. 107, three feet off, opened. She drew back with a start of horror. Suppose she had collided with her father on the landing! Timorously she peeped out, and saw Lionel Belmont, in his shirt-sleeves, disappear round the corner.

"He is going to talk with his friend Mr. Pank," Nina thought, knowing that No. 120 lay at some little distance round that corner.

Mr. Belmont had left the door of No. 107 slightly ajar. An unseen and terrifying force impelled Nina to venture into the corridor, and then to push the door of No. 107 wide open. The same force, not at all herself, quite beyond herself, seemed to impel her by the shoulders into the room. As she stood unmistakably within her father's private sitting-room, scared, breathing rapidly, inquisitive, she said to herself:

"I shall hear him coming back, and I can run out before he turns the corner of the corridor." And she kept her little pink ears alert.

She looked about the softly brilliant room, such an extravagant triumph of luxurious comfort as twenty years ago would have aroused comment even in Mayfair; but there were scores of similar rooms in the Majestic. No one thought twice of them. Her father's dress-coat was thrown arrogantly over a Louis Quatorze chair, and this careless flinging of the expensive shining coat across the gilded chair somehow gave Nina a more intimate appreciation of her father's grandeur and of the great and glorious life he led. She longed to recline indolently in a priceless tea-gown on the couch by the fireplace and issue orders. . . . She approached the writing-table, littered with papers, documents, in scores and hundreds. To the left was the brown bag. It was

locked, and very heavy, she thought. To the right was a pile of telegrams. She picked up one, and read:

"Pank, Grand Hotel, Birmingham. Why not burgle hotel? Simplest most effective plan and solves all difficulties.—BELMONT.

She read it twice, crunched it in her left hand, and picked up another one:

"Pank, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. Your objection absurd. See safe in bureau at Majestic. Quite easy. Scene with girl second evening.—BELMONT.

The thing flashed blindingly upon her. Her father and Mr. Pank belonged to the swell mob of which she had heard and seen so much at Doncaster. She at once became the excessively knowing and suspicious hotel employé, to whom every stranger is a rogue until he has proved the contrary. Had she lived through three St. Leger weeks for nothing? At the hotel at Doncaster, what they didn't know about thieves and sharpers was not knowledge. The landlord kept a loaded revolver in his desk there during the week. And she herself had been provided with a whistle which she was to blow at the slightest sign of a row; she had blown it once, and seven policemen had appeared within thirty seconds. The landlord used to tell tales of masterly and huge scoundrelism that would make Charles Peace turn in his grave. And the landlord had ever insisted that no one, no one at all, could always distinguish

with certainty between a real gent and a swell-mobsman.

So her father and Mr. Pank had deceived everyone in the hotel except herself, and they meant to rob the safe in the bureau to-morrow night. Of course Mr. Lionel Belmont was a villain, or he would not have deserted her poor dear mother; it was annoying, but indubitable. . . . Even now he was maturing his plans round the corner with that Mr. Pank. . . . Burglars always went about in shirt-sleeves. . . . The brown bag contained the tools. . . .

The shock was frightful, disastrous, tragic; but it had solved the situation by destroying it. Practically, Nina no longer had a father. He had existed for about four hours as a magnificent reality, full of possibilities; he now ceased to be recognisable.

She was about to pick up a third telegram when a slight noise caused her to turn swiftly; she had forgotten to keep her little pink ears alert. Her father stood in the doorway. He was certainly the victim of some extraordinary emotion; his face worked; he seemed at a loss what to do or say; he seemed pained, confused, even astounded. Simple, foolish Nina had upset the balance of his equations.

Then he resumed his self-control and came forward into the room with a smile intended to be airy. Meanwhile Nina had not moved. One is inclined to pity the artless and defenceless girl in this midnight duel of wits with a shrewd, resourceful, and unscrupulous man of the world. But one's pity

should not be lavished on an undeserving object. Though Nina trembled, she was mistress of herself. She knew just where she was, and just how to behave. She was as impregnable as Gibraltar.

"Well," said Mr. Lionel Belmont, genially gazing at her pose, "you do put snap into it, any way."

"Into what?" she was about to enquire, but prudently she held her tongue. Drawing herself up with the gesture of an offended and unapproachable queen, the little thing sailed past him, close past her own father, and so out of the room.

"Say!" she heard him remark: "let's straighten this thing out, eh?"

But she heroically ignored him, thinking the while that, with all his sins, he was attractive enough. She still held the first telegram in her long, thin fingers.

So ended the nocturne.

IV

At five o'clock the next morning Nina's trifling nose was pressed against the window-pane of her cubicle. In the enormous slate roof of the Majestic are three rows of round windows, like port-holes. Out of the highest one, at the extremity of the left wing Nina looked. From thence she could see five other vast hotels, and the yard of Charing Cross Station, with three night-cabs drawn up to the kerb, and a red van of W. H. Smith and Son disappearing into the station. The Strand was quite empty. It was a strange world of sleep and greyness and dis-

illusion. Within a couple of hundred yards or so of her thousands of people lay asleep, and they would all soon wake into the disillusion, and the Strand would wake, and the first omnibus of all the omnibuses would come along. . . .

Never had simple Nina felt so sad and weary. She was determined to give up her father. She was bound to tell the manager of her discovery, for Nina was an honest servant, and she was piqued in her honesty. No one should know that Lionel Belmont was her father. . . . She saw before her the task of forgetting him and forgetting the rich dreams of which he had been the origin. She was once more a bookkeeper with no prospects.

At eight she saw the manager in the managerial room. Mr. Reuben was a young Jew, aged about thirty-four, with a cold but indestructibly polite manner. He was a great man, and knew it; he had almost invented the Majestic.

She told him her news; it was impossible for foolish Nina to conceal her righteousness and her sense of importance.

"Whom did you say, Miss Malpas?" asked Mr. Reuben.

"Mr. Lionel Belmont — at least, that's what he calls himself."

"Calls himself, Miss Malpas?"

"Here's one of the telegrams."

Mr. Reuben read it, looked at little Nina, and smiled; he never laughed.

"Is it possible, Miss Malpas," said he, "that you

don't know who Mr. Belmont and Mr. Pank are?" And then, as she shook her head, he continued in his impassive, precise way: "Mr. Belmont is one of the principal theatrical managers in the United States. Mr. Pank is one of the principal playwrights in the United States. Mr. Pank's melodrama "Nebraska" is now being played at the Regency by Mr. Belmont's own American company. Another of Mr. Belmont's companies starts shortly for a tour in the provinces with the musical comedy "The Dolmenico Doll." I believe that Mr. Pank and Mr. Belmont are now writing a new melodrama, and as they have both been travelling, but not together, I expect that these telegrams relate to that melodrama. Did you suppose that safe-burglars wire their plans to each other like this?" He waved the telegram with a gesture of fatigue.

Silly, ruined Nina made no answer.

"Do you ever read the papers — the *Telegraph* or the *Mail,* Miss Malpas?"

"N–no, sir."

"You ought to, then you wouldn't be so ignorant and silly. A hotel-clerk can't know too much. And, by-the-way, what were you doing in Mr. Belmont's room last night, when you found these wonderful telegrams?"

"I went there — I went there — to ——"

"Don't cry, please, it won't help you. You must leave here to-day. You've been here three weeks, I think. I'll tell Mr. Smith to pay you your month's wages. You don't know enough for the Majestic,

Miss Malpas. Or perhaps you know too much. I'm sorry. I had thought you would suit us. Keep straight, that's all I have to say to you. Go back to Doncaster, or wherever it is you came from. Leave before five o'clock. That will do."

With a godlike air, Mr. Reuben swung round his office-chair and faced his desk. He tried not to perceive that there was a mysterious quality about this case which he had not quite understood. Nina tripped piteously out.

In the whole of London Nina had one acquaintance, and an hour or so later, after drinking some tea, she set forth to visit this acquaintance. The weight of her own foolishness, fatuity, silliness, and ignorance was heavy upon her. And, moreover, she had been told that Mr. Lionel Belmont had already departed back to America, his luggage being marked for the American Transport Line.

She was primly walking, the superlative of the miserable, past the façade of the hotel, when someone sprang out of a cab and spoke to her. And it was Mr. Lionel Belmont.

"Get right into this hansom, Miss Malpas," he said kindly, "and I guess we'll talk it out."

"Talk what out?" she thought.

But she got in.

"Marble Arch, and go up Regent Street, and don't hurry," said Mr. Belmont to the cabman.

"How did he know my name?" she asked herself.

"A hansom's the most private place in London," he said after a pause.

It certainly did seem to her very cosey and private, and her nearness to one of the principal theatrical managers in America was almost startling. Her white frock, with the black velvet decorations, touched his grey suit.

"Now," he said, "I do wish you'd tell me why you were in my parlour last night. Honest."

"What for?" she parried, to gain time.

Should she begin to disclose her identity?

"Because — well, because — oh, look here, my girl, I want to be on very peculiar terms with you. I want to straighten out everything. You'll be sort of struck, but I'll be bound to tell you I'm your father. Now, don't faint or anything."

"Oh, I knew that!" she gasped. "I saw the moles on your wrist when you were registering — mother told me about them. Oh, if I had only known you knew!"

They looked at one another.

"It was only the day before yesterday I found out I possessed such a thing as a daughter. I had a kind of fancy to go around to the old spot. This notion of me having a daughter struck me considerable, and I concluded to trace her and size her up at once." Nina was bound to smile. "So your poor mother's been dead three years?"

"Yes," said Nina.

"Ah! don't let us talk about that. I feel I can't say just the right thing. . . . And so you knew me by those pips." He pulled up his right sleeve. "Was that why you came up to my parlour?"

Nina nodded, and Lionel Belmont sighed with relief.

"Why didn't you tell me at once, my dear, who you were?"

"I didn't dare," she smiled; "I was afraid. I thought you wouldn't ——"

"Listen," he said; "I've wanted someone like you for years, years, and years. I've got no one to look after ——"

"Then why didn't *you* tell *me* at once who you were?" she questioned with adorable pertness.

"Oh!" he laughed; "how could I — plump like that? When I saw you first, in the bureau, the stricken image of your mother at your age, I was nearly down. But I came up all right, didn't I, my dear? I acted it out well, didn't I?"

* * * * * * *

The hansom was rolling through Hyde Park, and the sunshiny hour was eleven in June. Nina looked forth on the gay and brilliant scene: rhododendrons, duchesses, horses, dandies — the incomparable wealth and splendour of the capital. She took a long breath, and began to be happy for the rest of her life. She felt that, despite her plain frock, she was in this picture. Her father had told her that his income was rising on a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, and he would thank her to spend it. Her father had told her, when she had confessed the scene with Mr. Reuben and what led to it, that she had grit, and that the mistake was

excusable, and that a girl as pretty as she was didn't want to be as fly as Mr. Reuben had said. Her father had told her that he was proud of her, and he had not been so rude as to laugh at her blunder.

She felt that she was about to enter upon the true and only vocation of a dainty little morsel — namely, to spend money earned by other people. She thought less homicidally now of the thirteen chorus-girls of the previous night.

"Say," said her father, "I sail this afternoon for New York, Nina."

"They said you'd gone, at the hotel."

"Only my baggage. The *Minnehaha* clears at five. I guess I want you to come along too. On the voyage we'll get acquainted, and tell each other things."

"Suppose I say I won't?"

She spoke despotically, as the pampered darling should.

"Then I'll wait for the next boat. But it'll be awkward."

"Then I'll come. But I've got no things."

He pushed up the trap-door.

"Driver, Bond Street. And get on to yourself, for goodness' sake! Hurry."

"You told me not to hurry," grumbled the cabby.

"And now I tell you to hustle. See?"

"Shall you want me to call myself Belmont?" Nina asked.

"I chose it because it was a fine ten-horse-power

name twenty years ago," said her father; and she murmured that she liked the name very much.

As Lionel Belmont the Magnificent paid the cabman, and Nina walked across the pavement into one of the most famous repositories of expensive frippery in the world, she thrilled with the profoundest pleasure her tiny soul was capable of. Foolish, simple Nina had achieved the *nec plus ultra* of her languorous dreams.

MIMI

SOME people may regard the events here set down as perfectly unimportant and therefore unworthy of perusal. Some may regard them as amusing, in a light, gossamer way. A few (I hope) may regard them as a tragedy.

I

On a Saturday afternoon in late October Edward Coe, a satisfactory average successful man of thirty-five, was walking slowly along the King's Road, Brighton. A native and inhabitant of the Five Towns in the Midlands, he had the brusque and energetic mien of the Midlands. It could be seen that he was a stranger to the south; and, in fact, he was now viewing for the first time the vast and glittering spectacle of the southern pleasure city in the unique glory of her autumn season. A spectacle to enliven any man by its mere splendour! And yet Edward Coe was gloomy. One reason for his gloom was that he had just left a bicycle, with a deflated back tire, to be repaired at a shop in Preston Street. Not perhaps an adequate reason for gloom! . . . Well, that depends. He had been informed by the blue-clad repairer, after due inspection, that the trouble was not a common puncture, but a malady of the valve mysterious.

And the deflation was not the sole cause of his gloom. There was another. He was on his honeymoon. Understand me — not a honeymoon of romance, but a real honeymoon. Who that has ever been on a real honeymoon can look back upon the adventure and faithfully say that it was an unmixed ecstasy of joy? A honeymoon is in its nature and consequences so solemn, so dangerous, and so pitted with startling surprises, that the most irresponsible bridegroom, the most light-hearted, the least in love, must have moments of grave anxiety. And Edward Coe was far from irresponsible. Nor was he only a little in love. Moreover the circumstances of his marriage were peculiar, and he had married a dark, brooding, passionate girl.

Mrs. Coe was the younger of two sisters named Olive Wardle, well-known in the most desirable circles in the Five Towns. I mean those circles where intellectual and artistic tastes are united with sound incomes and excellent food delicately served. It will certainly be asked why two sisters should be named Olive. The answer is that though Olive One and Olive Two were treated as sisters, and even treated themselves as sisters, they were not sisters. They were not even half-sisters. They had first met at the age of nine. The father of Olive One, a widower, had married the mother of Olive Two, a widow. Olive One was the elder by a few months. Olive Two gradually allowed herself to be called Wardle because it saved trouble. They got on with one another very well indeed, especially after the

death of both parents, when they became joint mistresses, each with a separate income, of a nice house at Sneyd, the fashionable residential village on the rim of the Five Towns. Like all persons who live long together, they grew in many respects alike. Both were dark, brooding, and passionate, and to this deep similarity a superficial similarity of habits and demeanour was added. Only, whereas Olive One was rather more inclined to be the woman of the world Olive Two was rather more inclined to study, and was particularly interested in the theory of music.

They were sought after, naturally. And yet they had reached the age of twenty-five before the world perceived that either of them was not sought after in vain. The fact, obvious enough, that Pierre Emile Vaillac had become an object of profound human interest to Olive One — this fact excited the world, and the world would have been still more excited had it been aware of another fact that was not at all obvious: namely, that Pierre Emile Vaillac was the cause of a secret and terrible breach between the two sisters. Vaillac, a widower with two young children, Mimi and Jean, was a Frenchman, and a great authority on the decoration of egg-shell china, who had settled in the Five Towns as expert partner in one of the classic china firms at Longshaw. He was undoubtedly a very attractive man.

Olive One, when the relations between herself and Vaillac were developing into something unmis-

takable, had suddenly, and without warning, accused Olive Two of poaching. It was a frightful accusation, and a frightful scene followed it, one of those scenes that are seldom forgiven and never forgotten. It altered their lives; but as they were women of considerable commonsense and of good breeding, each did her best to behave afterwards as though nothing had happened.

Olive Two did not convince Olive One of her innocence, because she did not bring forward the supreme proof of it. She was too proud — in her brooding and her mystery — to do so. The supreme proof was that at this time she herself was secretly engaged to be married to Edward Coe, who had conquered her heart with unimaginable swiftness a few weeks before she was about to sit for a musical examination at Manchester. "Let us say nothing till after my exam," she had suggested to her betrothed. "There will be an enormous fuss, and it will put me off, and I shall fail, and I don't want to fail, and you don't want me to fail." He agreed rapturously. Of course she did fail, nevertheless. But being obstinate she said she would go in again, and they continued to make a secret of the engagement. They found the secret delicious. Then followed the devastating episode of Vaillac. Shortly afterwards Olive One and Vaillac were married, and then Olive Two was alone in the nice house. The examination was forgotten, and she hated the house. She wanted to be married; Coe also. But nothing

had been said. Difficult to announce her engagement just then! The world would say that she had married out of imitation, and her sister would think that she had married out of pique. Besides, there would be the fuss which Olive Two hated. Already the fuss of her sister's marriage, and the effort at the wedding of pretending that nothing had happened between them, had fatigued the nerves of Olive Two.

Then Edward Coe had had the brilliant and seductive idea of marrying in secret. To slip away, and then to return, saying, "We are married. That's all!" . . . Why not? No fuss! No ceremonial! The accomplished fact, which simplifies everything!

It was therefore, a secret honeymoon that Edward Coe was on; delightful — but surreptitious, furtive! His mental condition may be best described by stating that, though he was conscious of rectitude, he somehow could not look a policeman in the face. After all, plain people do not usually run off on secret honeymoons. Had he acted wisely? Perhaps this question, presenting itself now and then, was the chief cause of his improper gloom.

II

However, the spectacle of Brighton on a fine Saturday afternoon in October had its effect on Edward Coe — the effect which it has on everybody. Little by little it inspired him with the joy of life, and

straightened his back, and put a sparkle into his eyes. And he was filled with the consciousness of the fact that it is a fine thing to be well-dressed and to have loose gold in your pocket, and to eat, drink, and smoke well; and to be among crowds of people who are well-dressed and have loose gold in their pockets, and eat and drink and smoke well; and to know that a magnificent woman will be waiting for you at a certain place at a certain hour, and that upon catching sight of you her dark orbs will take on an enchanting expression reserved for you alone, and that she is utterly yours. In a word, he looked on the bright side of things again. It could not ultimately matter a bilberry whether his marriage was public or private.

He lit a cigarette gaily. He could not guess that untoward destiny was waiting for him close by the newspaper kiosque.

A little girl was leaning against the palisade there, and gazing somewhat restlessly about her. A quite little girl aged, perhaps, eleven, dressed in blue serge, with a short frock and long legs, and a sailor hat (H.M.S. *Formidable*), and long hair down her back, and a mild, twinkling, trustful glance. Somewhat untidy, but nevertheless the image of grace.

She saw him first. Otherwise he might have fled. But he was right upon her before he saw her. Indeed, he heard her before he saw her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Coe."

"Mimi!"

The Vaillacs were in Brighton! He had chosen

practically the other end of the world for his honeymoon, and lo! by some awful clumsiness of fate the Vaillacs were at the same end! The very people from whom he wished to conceal his honeymoon until it was over, would know all about it at the very start!. Relations between the two Olives would be still more strained and difficult! In brief, from optimism he swung violently back to darkest pessimism. What could be worse than to be caught red-handed in a surreptitious honeymoon?

She noticed his confusion, and he knew that she noticed it. She was a little girl. But she was also a little woman, a little Frenchwoman, who spoke English perfectly — and yet with a difference! They had flirted together, she and Mr. Coe. She had a new mother now, but for years she had been without a mother, and she would receive callers at her father's house (if he happened to be out) with a delicious imitation of a practised hostess.

He raised his hat and shook hands, and tried to play the game.

"What are you doing here, Mimi?" he asked.

"What are *you* doing here?" she parried, laughing. And then, perceiving his increased trouble, and that she was failing in tact, she went on rapidly, with a screwing up of the childish shoulders, and something between a laugh and a grin: "It's my back. It seems it's not strong. And so we've taken an ever so jolly little house for the autumn, because of the air, you know. Didn't you know?"

No, he did not know. That was the worst of

strained relations. You were not informed of events in advance.

"Where?" he asked.

"Oh!" she said, pointing. "That way. On the road to Rottingdean. Near the big girls' school. We came in on that lovely electric railway — along the beach. Have you been on it, Mr. Coe?"

Terrible! Rottingdean was precisely the scene of his honeymoon. The hazard of fate was truly appalling. He and his wife might have walked one day straight into the arms of her sister! He went hot and cold.

"And where are the others?" he asked nervously.

"Mamma" — she coloured as she used this word, so strange on her lips — "Mamma's at home. Father may come to-night. And Ada has brought us here so that Jean can have his hair cut. He didn't want to come without me."

"Ada?"

"Ada's a new servant. She's just gone in there again to see how long the barber will be." Mimi indicated a barber's shop opposite. "And I'm waiting here," she added.

"Mimi," he said, in a confidential tone, "can you keep a secret?"

She grew solemn. "Yes." She smiled seriously. "What?"

"About meeting me. Don't tell anybody you've met me to-day. See?"

"Not Jean?"

"No, not Jean. But later on you can tell — when

I give you the tip. I don't want anybody to know just now."

It was a shame. He knew it was a shame. He deliberately flattered her by appealing to her as to a grown woman. He deliberately put a cajoling tone into his voice. He would not have done it if Mimi had not been Mimi — if she had been an ordinary sort of English girl. But she was Mimi. And the temptation was very strong. She promised, gravely. He knew that he could rely on her.

Hurrying away lest Jean and the servant might emerge from the barber's, he remembered with compunction that he had omitted to show any curiosity about Mimi's back.

III

The magnificent woman was to be waiting for him in the lounge of the Royal York Hotel at a quarter to four. She was coming in to Brighton by the Rottingdean omnibus, which function, unless the driver changes his mind, occurs once in every two or three hours. He, being under the necessity of telephoning to London on urgent business, had hired a bicycle and ridden in. Despite the accident to this prehistoric machine, he arrived at the Royal York half a minute before the Rottingdean omnibus passed through the Old Steine, and set down the magnificent woman, his wife. The sight of her stepping off the omnibus really did thrill him. They entered the hotel together, and, accustomed though the Royal

York is to the reception of magnificent women, Olive made a sensation therein. As for him, he could not help feeling just as though he had eloped with her. He could not help fancying that all the brilliant company in the lounge was murmuring under the strains of the band: "That Johnny there has certainly eloped with that splendid creature!"

"Ed," she asked, fixing her dark eyes upon him, "is anything the matter?"

They were having tea at a little Moorish table in the huge bay window of the lounge.

"No," he said. This was the first lie of his career as a husband. But truly he could not bring himself to give her the awful shock of telling her that the Vaillacs were closed at hand, that their secret was discovered, and that their peace and security depended entirely upon the discretion of little Mimi and upon their not meeting other Vaillacs.

"Then it's having that puncture that has upset you," his wife insisted. You see her feelings towards him were so passionate that she could not leave him alone. She was utterly pre-occupied by him.

"No," he said guiltily.

"I'm afraid you don't very much care for this place," she went on, because she knew now that he was not telling her the truth, and that something, indeed, was the matter.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I was informed that the finest tea and the most perfect toast in

Brighton were to be had in this lounge, and upon my soul I feel as if I could keep on having tea here for ever and ever amen!"

He was trying to be gay, but not very successfully.

"I don't mean just here," she said. "I mean all this south coast."

"Well——" he began judicially.

"Oh! Ed!" she implored him. "*Do* say you don't like it!"

"Why!" he exclaimed. "Don't *you?*"

She shook her head. "I much prefer the north," she remarked.

"Well," he said, "let's go. Say Scarborough."

"You're joking," she murmured. "You adore this south coast."

"Never!" he asserted positively.

"Well, darling," she said, "if you hadn't said first that you didn't care for it, of course I shouldn't have breathed a word——"

"Let's go to-morrow," he suggested.

"Yes." Her eyes shone.

"First train! We should have to leave Rottingdean at six o'clock a. m."

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. She was enchanted by this idea of a capricious change of programme. It gave such a sense of freedom, of irresponsibility, of romance!

"More toast, please," he said to the waiter, joyously.

It cost him no effort to be gay now. He could not have been sad. The world was suddenly trans-

formed into the best of all possible worlds. He was saved! They were saved! Yes, he could trust Mimi. By no chance would they be caught. They would stick in their rooms all the evening, and on the morrow they would be away long before the Vaillacs were up. Papa and "mamma" Vaillac were terrible for late-rising. And when he had got his magnificent Olive safe in Scarborough, or wherever their noses might lead them, then he would tell her of the risk they had run.

They both laughed from mere irrational glee, and Edward Coe nearly forgot to pay the bill. However, he did pay it. They departed from the Royal York. He put his Olive into the returning Rottingdean omnibus, and then hurried to get his repaired bicycle. He had momentarily quaked lest Mimi and company might be in the omnibus. But they were not. They must have left earlier, fortunately, or walked.

IV

When he was still about a mile away from Rottingdean, and the hour was dusk, and he was walking up a hill, he caught sight of a girl leaning on a gate that led by a long path to a house near the cliffs. It was Mimi. She gave a cry of recognition. He did not care now — he was at ease now — but really, with that house so close to the road and so close to Rottingdean, he and his Olive had practically begun their honeymoon on the summit of a volcano!

Mimi was pensive. He felt remorse at having

bound her to secrecy. She was so pensive, and so wistful, and her eyes were so loyal, that he felt he owed her a more complete confidence.

"I'm on my honeymoon, Mimi," he said. It gave him pleasure to tell her.

"Yes," she said simply, "I saw Auntie Olive go by in the omnibus."

That was all she said. He was thunderstruck, as much by her calm simplicity as by anything else. Children were astounding creatures.

"Did Jean see her, or anyone?" he asked.

Mimi shook her head.

Then he told her they were leaving the next morning at six.

"Shall you be in a carriage?" she enquired.

"Yes."

"Oh! Do let me come out and see you go past," she pleaded. "Nobody else in our house will be up till hours afterwards! . . . Do!"

He was about to say "No," for it would mean revealing the whole affair to his wife at once. But after an instant he said "Yes." He would not refuse that exquisite appealing gesture. Besides, why keep anything whatever from Olive, even for a day?

At dinner he told his wife, and was glad to learn that she also thought highly of Mimi, and had confidence in her.

V

Mimi lay in bed in the nursery of the hired house on the way to Rottingdean, which, considering that

it was not "home," was a fairly comfortable sort of abode. The nursery was immense, though an attic. The white blinds of the two windows were drawn, and a fire burned in the grate, lighting it pleasantly and behaving in a very friendly manner. At the other end of the room, in the deep shadow, was Jean's bed.

The door opened quietly, and someone came into the room and pushed the door to without quite shutting it.

"Is that you, mamma?" Jean demanded in his shrill voice, from the distance of the bed in the corner. His age was exactly eight.

"Yes, dear," said the new stepmother.

The menial Ada had arranged the children for the night, and now the stepmother had come up to kiss them, and be kind. She was a conscientious young woman, full of a desire to do right, and she had determined not to be like the traditional stepmother.

She kissed Jean, who had taken quite a fancy to her, and tickled him agreeably, and tucked him up anew, and then moved silently across the room to Mimi. Mimi could see her face in the twilight of the fire. A handsome, good-natured face; yet very determined, and perhaps a little too full of commonsense. It had a responsible, somewhat grave look. After all these two young children were a responsibility, especially Mimi with her back; and, moreover, Pierre Emile Vaillac had disappointed both her and her stepchildren by telegraphing that he could not arrive that night. Olive One, the bride

of three months, had put on fine raiment for nothing.

"Well, Mimi," she said in her low vibrating voice, as she stood over the bed, "I do hope you didn't over-tire yourself this afternoon." Then she kissed Mimi.

"Oh, no, mamma!" The little girl smiled.

"It seems you waited outside the barber's while Jeannot was having his hair cut."

"Yes, mamma. I didn't like to go in."

"Ada didn't stay with you all the time?"

"No, mamma. First of all she took Jeannot in, and then she came out to me, and then she went in again to see how long he would be."

"I'm sorry she left you alone in the street. She ought not to have done so, and I've told her. . . . The King's Road, with all kinds of people about!"

Mimi said nothing. The new Madame Vaillac moved a little towards the fire.

"Of course," the latter went on, "I know you're a regular little woman, and perhaps I needn't tell you, but you must never speak to anyone in the street."

"No, mamma."

"Particularly in Brighton. . . . You never do, do you?"

"No, mamma."

"Good-night."

The stepmother left the room. Mimi could feel her heart beating. Then Jean called out:

"Mimi."

She made no reply. The fact was she was too disturbed to be able to reply.

Jean called again and then got out of bed and thudded across the room to her bedside.

"I say, Mimi," he screeched in his insistent treble, "who *was* it you were talking to?"

Mimi's heart did not beat, it jumped.

"When? Where?"

"This afternoon, when I was having my hair cut."

"How do you know I was talking to anybody?"

"Ada saw you through the window of the barber's."

"When did she tell you?"

"She didn't. I heard her telling mamma."

There was a silence. Then Mimi hid her face, and Jean could hear sobbing.

"You might tell me!" Jean insisted. He was too absorbed by his own curiosity, and too upset by the full realisation of the fact that she had kept something from him, to be touched by her tears.

"It's a secret," she muttered into the pillow.

"You might tell me!"

"Go away, Jeannot!" she burst out hysterically.

He gave an angry lunge against the bed.

"I tell you everything; and it's not fair. *C'est pas juste!*" he said, savagely, but there were tears in his voice, too. He was a creature at once sensitive and violent, passionately attached to Mimi.

He thudded back to his bed. But even before he had reached his bed Mimi could hear him weeping.

She gradually stilled her own sobs, and after a

time Jean's ceased. And then she guessed that Jean had gone to sleep. But Mimi did not go to sleep. She knew that chance, and Mr. Coe, and that odious new servant, Ada, had combined to ruin her life. She saw the whole affair clearly. Ada was officious and fussy, also secretive and given to plotting. Ada's leading idea was that children had to be circumvented. Imagine the detestable woman spying on her from the window, and then saying nothing to her, but sneaking off to tell tales to her mamma! Imagine it! Mimi's strict sense of justice could not blame her mamma. She was sure that the new stepmother meant well by her. Her mamma had given her every opportunity to confess, to admit of her own accord that she had been talking to somebody in the street, and she had not confessed. On the contrary, she had lied. Her mamma would probably say nothing more on the matter, for she had a considerable sense of honour with children, and would not take an unfair advantage. Having tried to obtain a confession from Mimi by pretending that she knew nothing, and having failed, she was not the woman to turn round and say, "Now I know all about it. So just confess at once!" Her mamma would accept the situation, would try to behave as if nothing had happened, and would probably even say nothing to her father.

But Mimi knew that she was ruined for ever in her stepmother's esteem.

And she had quarrelled with Jean, which was exceedingly hateful and exceedingly rare. And there

was also the private worry of her mysterious back. And there was another thing. The mere fact that her friend, Mr. Coe, had gone and married somebody. For long she had a weakness for Mr. Coe. They had been intimate at times. Once, last year, in the stern of a large sailing-boat at Morecambe, while her friends were laughing and shouting at the piano, she and Mr. Coe had had a most beautiful quiet conversation about her thoughts on the world in general; she had stroked his hand. . . . No! She had no dream whatever of growing up into a woman and then marrying Mr. Coe! Certainly not. But still, that he should have gone and married, like that . . . it was . . .

The fire died out into blackness, thus ceasing to be a friend. Still she did not sleep. Was it likely that she should sleep, with the tragedy and woe of the entire universe crushing her?

VI

Mr. Edward Coe and Olive Two arose from their bed the next morning in great spirits. Mr. Coe had told both his wife and Mimi that the hour of departure from Rottingdean would be six o'clock. But this was an exaggeration. So far as his wife was concerned, he had already found it well to exaggerate on such matters. A little judicious exaggeration lessened the risk of missing trains and other phenomena which cannot be missed without confusion and disappointment.

As a fact it was already six o'clock when Edward

Coe looked forth from the bedroom window. He was completely dressed. His wife also was completely dressed. He therefore felt quite safe about the train. The window, which was fairly high up in the world, gave on the south end, so that he had a view, not only of the vast naked downs billowing away towards Newhaven, but also of the Channel, which was calm, and upon which little parcels of fog rested. The sky was clear overhead, of a greenish sapphire colour, and the autumnal air bit and gnawed on the skin like some friendly domestic animal, and invigorated like an expensive tonic. On the dying foliage of a tree near the window millions of precious stones hung. Cocks were boasting. Cows were expressing a justifiable anxiety. And in the distance a small steamer was making a great deal of smoke about nothing, as it puffed out of Newhaven harbour.

"Olive," he said.

"What is it?"

She was putting hats into the top of her trunk. She had a special hat-box, but the hats were too large for it, and she packed minor trifles in the hat-box, such as skirts. This was one of the details which first indicated to an astounded Edward Coe that a woman is never less like a man than when travelling.

"Come here," he commanded her.

She obeyed.

"Look at that," he commanded her, pointing to the scene of which the window was the frame.

She obeyed. She also looked at him with her dark, passionate, and yet half-mocking eyes.

"Yes," she said, "and who's going to make that trunk lock?"

She snapped her fingers at the sweet morning influences of nature, to which he was peculiarly sensitive. And yet he was delighted. He found it entirely delicious that she should say, when called upon to admire nature: "Who's going to make that trunk lock?"

He stroked her hair.

"It's no use trying to keep your hair decent at the seaside," she remarked, pouting exquisitely.

He explained that his hand was offering no criticism of her hair. And then there was a knock at the bedroom door, and Olive Two jumped a little away from her husband.

"Come in," he cried, pretending to be as bold as a lion.

However, he had forgotten that the door was locked, and he had to go and open it.

A tray with coffee, and milk and sugar, and slices of bread-and-butter was in the doorway, and behind the tray the little parlour-maid of the little hotel. He greeted the girl and instructed her to carry the tray to the table by the window.

"You are prompt," said Olive Two kindly. She had got up so miraculously early herself that she was startled to see any other woman up quite as early. And also she was a little surprised that the parlour-maid showed no surprise at these very unusual hours.

"Yes'm," replied the parlour-maid, wondering why Olive Two was so excited. The parlour-maid arose at five-thirty every morning of her life, except on special occasions, when she arose at four-thirty to assist in pastoral affairs.

"All right, this coffee, eh?" murmured Edward Coe as he put down the steaming cup after his first sip. They were alone again, seated opposite each other at the small table by the window.

Olive Two nodded.

It must not be supposed that this was the one unique dreamed-of hotel in England where the coffee is good of its own accord. No! In the matter of coffee this hotel was just like all other hotels. Only Olive Two had taken special precautions about that coffee. She had been into the hotel kitchen on the previous evening about that coffee.

"By the way," she asked, "where's the sun?"

"The sun doesn't happen to be up yet," said Edward. He looked at his diary and then at his watch. "Unless something goes wrong, you'll be seeing it inside of three minutes."

"Do you mean to say we shall see the sun rise?" she exclaimed.

He nodded.

"Well!" cried she, absurdly gleeful, "I never heard of such a thing!"

She watched the sunrise like a child who sees for the first time the inside of a watch. And when the sun had risen she glanced anxiously round the disordered room.

"For heaven's sake," she muttered, "don't let's forget these tooth-brushes!"

"You are so ridiculous," said he, "that I must kiss you."

The truth is that they were no better than two children out on an adventure.

It was the same when down in the hotel-yard they got into the small and decrepit victoria which was destined to take them and their luggage to Brighton. It was the same, but more so. They were both so pleased with themselves that their joy was bubbling continually out in manifestations that could only be described as infantile. The mere drive through the village, with the pony whisking his tail round corners, and the driver steadying the perilous hat-box with his left hand, was so funny that somehow they could not help laughing.

Then they had left the village and were climbing the exposed high-road, with the wavy blue-green downs on the right, and the immense glittering flat floor of the Channel on the left. And the mere sensation of being alive almost overwhelmed them.

And further on they passed a house that stood by itself away from the road towards the cliffs. It had a sloping garden and a small greenhouse. The gate leading to the road was ajar, but the blinds of all the windows were drawn, and there was no sign of life anywhere.

"That's the house," said Edward Coe briefly.

"I might have known it," Olive Two replied. "Olive One is certainly the worst getter-up that I

ever had anything to do with, and I believe Pierre Emile isn't much better."

"Well," said Edward, "it's no absolute proof of sluggardliness not to be up and about at six forty-five of a morning, you know."

"I was forgetting how early it was!" said Olive Two, and yawned. The yawn escaped her before she was aware of it. She pulled herself together, and kissed her hands mockingly, quizzically, to the house. "Good-bye, house! Good-bye, house!"

They were saved now. They could not be caught now on their surreptitious honeymoon. And their spirits went even higher.

"I thought you said Mimi would be waiting for use?" Olive Two remarked.

Edward Coe shrugged his shoulders. "Probably overslept herself! Or she may have got tired of waiting. I told her six o'clock."

On the whole Olive Two was relieved that Mimi was invisible.

"It wouldn't really matter if she *did* split on us, would it?" said the bride.

"Not a bit," the bridegroom agreed. Now that they had safely left the house behind them, they were both very valiant. It was as if they were both saying: "Who cares?" The bridegroom's mood was entirely different from his sombre apprehensiveness of the previous evening. And the early sunshine on the dewdrops was magnificent.

But a couple of hundred yards further on, at a bend of the road, they saw a little girl shading her

eyes with her hand, and gazing towards the sun. She wore a short blue serge frock, and she had long restless legs, and the word *Formidable* was on her forehead, and her eyes were all screwed up in the strong sunshine. And in her hand were flowers.

"There she is, after all!" said Edward quickly.

Olive Two nodded. Olive Two also blushed, for Mimi was the first person acquainted with her to see her after her marriage. She blushed because she was now a married woman.

Mimi, who with much prudence had managed so that the meeting should not occur exactly in front of the house, came towards the carriage. The pony was walking up a slope. She bounded forward with her childish grace and with the awkwardness of her long legs, and her hair loose in the breeze, and she laughed nervously.

"Good morning, good morning," she cried. "Shall I jump on the step? Then the horse won't have to stop."

And she jumped lightly on to the step, and giggled, still nervously, looking first at the bridegroom and then at the bride. The bridegroom held her securely by the shoulder.

"Well, Mimi," said Olive Two, whose shyness vanished in an instant before the shyness of the child. "This *is* nice of you."

The two women kissed. But Mimi did not offer her cheek to the bridegroom. He and she simply shook hands, as well as they could with a due regard for Mimi's firmness on the step.

"And who woke you up, eh?" Edward Coe demanded.

"Nobody," said Mimi, "I got up by myself, and," turning to Olive Two, "I've made this bouquet for you, auntie. There aren't any flowers in the fields. But I got the chrysanthemum out of the greenhouse, and put some bits of ferns and things round it. You must excuse it being tied up with darning wool."

She offered the bouquet diffidently, and Olive Two accepted it with a warm smile.

"Well," said Mimi, "I don't think I'd better go any farther, had I?"

There was another kiss and handshaking, and the next moment Mimi was standing in the road and waving a little crumpled handkerchief to the receding victoria, and the bride and bridegroom were cricking their necks to respond. She waved until the carriage was out of sight, and then she stood moveless, a blue and white spot on the green landscape, with the morning sun and the sea behind her.

"Exactly like a little woman, isn't she?" said Edward Coe, enchanted by the vision.

"Exactly!" Olive Two agreed. "Nice little thing! But how tired and unwell she looks! They did well to bring her away."

"Oh!" said Edward Coe, "she probably didn't sleep well because she was afraid of oversleeping herself. She looked perfectly all right yesterday."

FROM ONE GENERATION TO ANOTHER

I

IT is the greatest mistake in the world to imagine that, because the Five Towns is an industrial district, devoted to the manufacture of cups and saucers, marbles and door-knobs, therefore there is no luxury in it.

A writer, not yet deceased, who spent two nights there, and wrote four hundred pages about it, has committed himself to the assertion that there are no private carriages in its streets — only perambulators and tram-cars.

That writer's reputation is ruined in the Five Towns. For the Five Towns, although continually complaining of bad times, is immensely wealthy, as well as immensely poor — a country of contrasts, indeed — and private carriages, if they do not abound, exist at any rate in sufficient numbers.

Nay, more, automobiles of the most expensive French and English makes fly dashingly along its hilly roads and scatter in profusion the rich black mud thereof.

On a Saturday afternoon in last spring, such an automobile stood outside the garden entrance of Bleakridge House, just half-way between Hanbridge

and Bursley. It belonged to young Harold Etches, of Etches, Limited, the great porcelain manufacturers.

It was a 20 h.p. Panhard, and was worth over a thousand pounds as it stood there, throbbing, and Harold was proud of it.

He was also proud of his young wife, Maud, who, clad in several hundred pounds' worth of furs, had taken her seat next to the steering-wheel, and was waiting for Harold to mount by her side. The united ages of this handsome and gay couple came to less than forty-five.

And they owned the motor-car, and Bleakridge House with its ten bedrooms, and another house at Llandudno, and a controlling interest in Etches, Limited, that brought them in seven or eight thousand a year. They were a pretty tidy example of what the Five Towns can do when it tries to be wealthy.

At this moment, when Harold was climbing into the car, a shabby old man who was walking down the road, followed by a boy carrying a carpet-bag, stopped suddenly and touched Harold on the shoulder.

"Bless us!" exclaimed the old man. And the boy and the carpet-bag halted behind him.

"What? Uncle Dan?" said Harold.

"Uncle Dan!" cried Maud, springing up with an enchanting smile. "Why, it's ages since ——"

"And what d'ye reckon ye'n gotten here?" demanded the old man.

"It's my new car," Harold explained.

"And ca'st drive it, lad?" asked the old man.

"I should think I could!" said Harold confidently.

"H'm!" commented the old man, and then he shook hands, and thoroughly scrutinised Maud.

Now, this is the sort of thing that can only be seen and appreciated in a district like the Five Towns, where families spring into splendour out of nothing in the course of a couple of generations, and as often as not sink back again into nothing in the course of two generations more.

The Etches family is among the best known and the widest spread in the Five Towns. It originated in three brothers, of whom Daniel was the youngest. Daniel never married; the other two did. Daniel was not very fond of money; the other two were, and they founded the glorious firm of Etches. Harold was the grandson of one brother, and Maud was the granddaughter of the other. Consequently, they both stood in the same relation to Dan, who was their great-uncle — addressed as uncle "for short."

There is a good deal of snobbery in the Five Towns, but it does not exist among relatives. The relatives in danger of suffering by it would never stand it. Besides, although Dan's income did not exceed two hundred a year, he was really richer than his grandnephew, since Dan lived on half his income, whereas Harold, aided by Maud, lived on all of his.

Consequently, despite the vast difference in their stations, clothes, and manners, Daniel and his young relatives met as equals. It would have been amusing

to see any one — even the Countess of Chell, who patronised the entire district — attempt to patronise Dan.

In his time he had been the greatest pigeon-fancier in the county.

"So you're paying a visit to Bursley, uncle?" said Maud.

"Ay!" Dan replied. "I'm back i' owd Bosley. Sarah — my housekeeper, thou know'st ——"

"Not dead?"

"No. Her inna' dead; but her sister's dead, and I've give her a week's play [holiday], and come away. Rat Edge'll see nowt o' me this side Easter."

Rat Edge was the name of the village, five miles off, which Dan had honoured in his declining years.

"And what are you going to do now?" asked Harold.

"I'm going to owd Sam Shawn's, by th' owd church, to beg a bed."

"But you'll stop with us, of course?" said Harold.

"Nay, lad," said Dan.

"Oh yes, uncle," Maud insisted.

"Nay, lass," said Dan.

"Indeed, you will, uncle!" said Maud positively. "If you don't, I'll never speak to you again."

She had a charming fire in her eyes, had Maud.

Daniel, the old bachelor, yielded at once, but in his own style.

"I'll try it for a night, lass," said he.

Thus it occurred that the carpet-bag was carried into Bleakridge House, and that after some delay Harold and Maud carried off Uncle Dan with them in the car. He sat in the luxurious tonneau behind, and Maud had quitted her husband in order to join him. Possibly she liked the humorous wrinkles round his grey eyes. Or it may have been the eyes themselves. And yet Dan was nearer seventy than sixty.

The car passed everything on the road; it seemed to be overtaking electric trams all the time.

"So ye'n been married a year?" said Uncle Dan, smiling at Maud.

"Oh yes; a year and three days. We're quite used to it."

"Us'n be in h—ll in a minute, wench!" exclaimed Dan, calmly changing the topic, as Harold swung the car within an inch of a brewer's dray, and skidded slightly in the process. No anti-skidding device would operate in that generous, oozy mud.

And, as a matter of fact, they were in Hanbridge the next minute — Hanbridge, the centre of the religions, the pleasures, and the vices of the Five Towns.

"Bless us!" said the old man. "It's fifteen year and more since I were here."

"Harold," said Maud, "let's stop at the Piccadilly Café and have some tea."

"Café?" asked Dan. "What be that?"

"It's a kind of pub." Harold threw the explanation over his shoulder as he brought the car up with

swift dexterity in front of the Misses Callear's newly-opened afternoon tea-rooms.

"Oh, well, if it's a pub," said Uncle Dan, "I dunna object."

He frankly admitted, on entering, that he had never before seen a pub full of little tables and white cloths, and flowers, and young women, and silver tea-pots, and cake-stands. And though he *did* pour his tea into his saucer, he was sufficiently at home there to address the younger Miss Callear as "young woman," and to inform her that her beverage was lacking in Orange Pekoe. And the Misses Callear, who conferred a favour on their customers by serving them, didn't like it.

He became reminiscent.

"Ay!" he said, "when I left th' Five Towns fifty-two years sin' to go weaving i' Derbyshire wi' my mother's brother, tay were ten shilling a pun'. Us had it when us were sick — which wasna' often. We worked too hard for be sick. Hafe past five i' th' morning till eight of a night, and then Saturday afternoon walk ten mile to Glossop with a week's work on ye' back, and home again wi' th' brass.

"They've lost th' habit of work now-a-days, seemingly," he went on, as the car moved off once more, but slowly, because of the vast crowds emerging from the Knype football ground. "It's football, Saturday; bands of a Sunday; football, Monday; ill i' bed and getting round, Tuesday; do a bit o' work Wednesday; football, Thursday; draw wages Friday night; and football, Saturday. And wages higher

than ever. It's that as beats me — wages higher than ever ——

" Ye canna' smoke with any comfort i' these cars," he added, when Harold had got clear of the crowds and was letting out. He regretfully put his pipe in his pocket.

Harold skirted the whole length of the Five Towns from south to north, at an average rate of perhaps thirty miles an hour; and quite soon the party found itself on the outer side of Turnhill, and descending the terrible Clough Bank, three miles long, and of a steepness resembling the steepness of the side of a house.

The car had warmed to its business, and Harold took them down that declivity in a manner which startled even Maud, who long ago had resigned herself to the fact that she was tied for life to a young man for whom the word " danger " had no meaning.

At the bottom they had a severe skid; but as there was plenty of room for eccentricities, nothing happened except that the car tried to climb the hill again.

" Well, if I'd known," observed Uncle Dan, " if I'd guessed as you were reservin' this treat for th' owd uncle, I'd ha' walked."

The Etches blood in him was pretty cool, but his nerve had had a shaking.

Then Harold could not restart the car. The engine had stopped of its own accord, and, though Harold lavished much physical force on the magic handle in front, nothing would budge. Maud and the old man both got down, the latter with relief.

"Stuck, eh?" said Dan. "No steam?"

"That's it!" Harold cried, slapping his leg. "What an ass I am! She wants petrol, that's all. Maud, pass a couple of cans. They're under the seat there, behind. No; on the left, child."

However, there was no petrol in the car.

"That's that cursed Durand" (Durand being the new chauffeur — French, to match the car). "I told him not to forget. Last thing I said to the fool! Maud, I shall chuck that chap!"

"Can't we do anything?" asked Maud stiffly, putting her lips together.

"We can walk back to Turnhill and buy some petrol, some of us!" snapped Harold. "That's what we can do!"

"Sithee," said Uncle Dan. "There's the Plume o' Feathers half-a-mile back. Th' landlord's a friend o' mine. I can borrow his mare and trap, and drive to Turnhill and fetch some o' thy petrol, as thou calls it."

"It's awfully good of you, uncle."

"Nay, lad, I'm doing it for please mysen. But Maud mun come wi' me. Give us th' money for th' petrol, as thou calls it."

"Then I must stay here alone?" Harold complained.

"Seemingly," the old man agreed.

After a few words on pigeons, and a glass of beer, Dan had no difficulty whatever in borrowing his friend's white mare and black trap. He himself helped in the harnessing. Just as he was driving

triumphantly away, with that delicious vision Maud on his left hand and a stable-boy behind, he reined the mare in.

"Give us a couple o' penny smokes, matey," he said to the landlord, and lit one.

The mare could go, and Dan could make her go, and she did go. And then the whole turn-out looked extremely dashing when, ultimately, it dashed into the glare of the acetylene lamps which the deserted Harold had lighted on his car.

The red end of a penny smoke in the gloom of twilight looks exactly as well as the red end of an Havana. Moreover, the mare caracolled ornamentally in the rays of the acetylene, and the stable-boy had to skid down quick and hold her head.

"How much didst say this traction-engine had cost thee?" Dan asked, while Harold was pouring the indispensable fluid into the tank.

"Not far off twelve hundred," answered Harold lightly. "Keep that cigar away from here."

"Fifteen pun' 'ud buy this mare," Dan announced to the road.

"Now, all aboard!" Harold commanded at length. "How much shall I give to the boy for the horse and trap, uncle?"

"Nothing," said Dan. "I havena' finished wi' that mare yet. Didst think I was going to trust mysen i' that thing o' yours again? I'll meet thee at Bleakridge, lad."

"And I think I'll go with uncle, too, Harold," said Maud.

Whereupon they both got into the trap.

Harold stared at them, astounded.

"But I say ——" he protested, beginning to be angry.

Uncle Dan drove away like the wind, and the stable-boy had all he could do to clamber up behind.

II

Now, at dinner-time that night, in the dining-room of the commodious and well-appointed mansion of the youngest and richest of the Etches, Uncle Dan stood waiting and waiting for his host and hostess to appear. He was wearing a Turkish tasselled smoking-cap to cover his baldness, and he had taken off his jacket and put on his light, loose overcoat instead of it, since that was a comfortable habit of his.

He sent one of the two parlourmaids up-stairs for his carpet slippers out of the carpet-bag, and he passed part of the time in changing his boots for his slippers in front of the fire. Then at length, just as a maid was staggering out under the load of those enormous boots, Harold appeared, very correct, but alone.

"Awfully sorry to keep you waiting, uncle," said Harold, "but Maud isn't well. She isn't coming down to-night."

"What's up wi' Maud?"

"Oh, goodness knows!" responded Harold gloomily. "She's not well — that's all."

"H'm!" said Dan. "Well, let's peck a bit."

So they sat down and began to peck a bit, aided by

the two maids. Dan pecked with prodigious enthusiasm, but Harold was not in good pecking form. And as the dinner progressed, and Harold sent dish after dish up to his wife, and his wife returned dish after dish untouched, Harold's gloom communicated itself to the house in general.

One felt that if one had penetrated to the furthest corner of the furthest attic, a little parcel of spiritual gloom would have already arrived there. The sense of disaster was in the abode. The cook was prophesying like anything in the kitchen. Durand in the garage was meditating upon such of his master's pithy remarks as he had been able to understand.

When the dinner was over, and the coffee and liqueurs and cigars had been served, and the two maids had left the dining-room, Dan turned to his grandnephew and said —

"There's things as has changed since my time, lad, but human nature inna' one on 'em."

"What do you mean, uncle?" Harold asked awkwardly, self-consciously.

"I mean as thou'rt a dashed foo'!"

"Why?"

"But thou'lt get better o' that," said Dan.

Harold smiled sheepishly.

"I don't know what you're driving at, uncle," said he.

"Yes, thou dost, lad. Thou'st been and quarrelled wi' Maud. And I say thou'rt a dashed foo'!"

"As a matter of fact ——" Harold stammered.

"And ye've never quarrelled afore. This is th' fust time. And so thou'st under th' impression that th' world's come to an end. Well, th' fust quarrel were bound to come sooner or later."

"It isn't really a quarrel — it's about nothing ——"

"I know — I know," Dan broke in. "They always are. As for it not being a quarrel, lad, call it a picnic if thou'st a mind. But her's sulking upstairs, and thou'rt sulking down here."

"She was cross about the petrol," said Harold, glad to relieve his mind. "I hadn't a notion she was cross till I went up into the bedroom. Not a notion! I explained to her it wasn't my fault. I argued it out with her very calmly. I did my best to reason with her ——"

"Listen here, young 'un," Dan interrupted him. "How old art?"

"Twenty-three."

"Thou may'st live another fifty years. If thou'st a mind to spend 'em i' peace, thoud'st better give up reasoning wi' women. Give it up right now! It's worse nor drink, as a habit. Kiss 'em, cuddle 'em, beat 'em. But dunna' reason wi' 'em."

"What should you have done in my place?" Harold asked.

"I should ha' told Maud her was quite right."

"But she wasn't."

"Then I should ha' winked at mysen i' th' glass," continued Dan, "and kissed her."

"That's all very well ——"

"Naturally," said Dan, "her wanted to show off that car i' front o' me. That was but natural. And her was vexed when it went wrong."

"But I told her — I explained to her."

"Her's a handsome little wench," Dan proceeded. "And a good heart. But thou'st got ten times her brains, lad, and thou ought'st to ha' given in."

"But I can't always be ——"

"It's allus them as gives in as has their own way. I remember her grandfather — he was th' eldest o' us — he quarrelled wi' his wife afore they'd been married a week, and she raced him all over th' town wi' a besom ——"

"With a besom, uncle?" exclaimed Harold, shocked at these family disclosures.

"Wi' a besom," said Dan. "That come o' reasoning wi' a woman. It taught him a lesson, I can tell thee. And afterwards he always said as nowt was worth a quarrel — *nowt!* And it isna'."

"I don't think Maud will race me all over the town with a besom," Harold remarked reflectively.

"There's worse things nor that," said Dan. "Look thee here, get out o' th' house for a' 'our. Go to th' Conservative Club, and then come back. Dost understand?"

"But what ——"

"Hook it, lad!" said Dan curtly.

And just as Harold was leaving the room, like a school-boy, he called him in again.

"I havena' told thee, Harold, as I'm subject to attacks. I'm getting up in years. I go off like. It

isna' fits; but I go off. And if it should happen while I'm here, dunna' be alarmed."

"What are we to do?"

"Do nothing. I come round in a minute or two. Whatever ye do, dunna' give me brandy. It might kill me — so th' doctor says. I'm only telling thee in case."

"Well, I hope you won't have an attack," said Harold.

"It's a hundred to one I dunna'," said Dan.

And Harold departed.

Soon afterwards Uncle Dan wandered into a kitchen full of servants.

"Show me th' missis's bedroom, one on ye," he said to the crowd.

And presently he was knocking at Maud's door.

"Maudie!"

"Who is it?" came a voice.

"It's thy owd uncle. Can'st spare a minute?"

Maud appeared at the door, smiling, and arrayed in a *peignoir*.

"*He's* gone out," said Dan, implying scorn of the person who had gone out. "Wilt come downstairs?"

"Where's he gone to?" Maud demanded.

She didn't even pretend she was ill.

"Th' Club," said Dan.

And in about a hundred seconds or so he had her in the drawing-room, and she was actually pouring out gin for him. She looked ravishing in that *pei-*

gnoir, especially as she was munching an apple, and balancing herself on the arm of a chair.

"So he's been quarrelling with ye, Maud?" Dan began.

"No; not quarrelling, uncle."

"Well, call it what ye'n a mind," said Dan. "Call it a prayer-meeting. I didn't notice as ye came down for supper — dinner, as ye call it."

"It was like this, uncle," she said. "Poor Harry was very angry with himself about that petrol. Of course, he wanted the car to go well while you were in it; and he came up-stairs and grumbled at me for leaving him all alone and driving home with you."

"Oh, did he?" exclaimed Dan.

"Yes. I explained to him that of course I couldn't leave you all alone. Then he got hot. I kept quite calm. I reasoned it out with him as quietly as I could ——"

"Maudie, Maudie," protested the old man, "thou'rt th' prettiest wench i' this town, though I *am* thy great-uncle, and thou'st got plenty o' brains — a sight more than that husband o' thine."

"Do you think so, uncle?"

"Ay, but thou hasna' made use o' 'em to-night. Thou'rt a foolish wench, wench. At thy time o' life, and after a year o' th' married state, thou ought'st to know better than reason wi' a man in a temper."

"But, really, uncle, it was so absurd of Harold, wasn't it?"

"Ay!" said Dan. "But why didst-na' give in and kiss him, and smack his face for him?"

"There was nothing to give in about, uncle."

"There never is," said Dan. "There never is. That's the point. Still, thou'rt nigh crying, wench."

"I'm not, uncle," she contradicted, the tears falling on to the apple.

"And Harold's using bad language all up Trafalgar Road, I lay," Dan added.

"It was all Harold's fault," said Maud.

"Why, in course it were Harold's fault. But nowt's worth a quarrel, my dear — *nowt*. I remember Harold's grandfeyther — he were th' second of us, your grandfeyther were the eldest, and I were the youngest — I remember Harold's grandfeyther chasing his wife all over th' town wi' a besom a week after they were married."

"With a besom!" murmured Maud, pained and forgetting to cry. "Harold's grandfather, not mine?"

"Wi' a besom," Dan repeated, nodding. "They never quarrelled again — ne'er again. Th' old woman allus said after that as quarrels were for fools. And her was right."

"I don't see Harold chasing me across Bursley with a besom," said Maud primly. "But what you say is quite right, you dear old uncle. Men *are* queer — I mean husbands. You can't argue with them. You'd much better give in ——"

"And have your own way after all."

"And perhaps Harold was ——"

Harold's step could be heard in the hall.

"Oh, dear!" cried Maud. "What shall I do?"

"I'm not feeling very well," whispered Uncle Dan weakly. "I have these 'ere attacks sometimes. There's only one thing as'll do me any good — brandy."

And his head fell over one side of the chair, and he looked precisely like a corpse.

"Maud, what are you doing?" almost shouted Harold, when he came into the room.

She was putting a liqueur-glass to Uncle Dan's lips.

"Oh, Harold," she cried, "uncle's had an attack of some sort. I'm giving him some brandy."

"But you mustn't give him brandy," said Harold authoritatively to her.

"But I *must* give him brandy," said Maud. "He told me that brandy was the only thing to save him."

"Nonsense, child!" Harold persisted. "Uncle told *me* all about these attacks. They're perfectly harmless so long as he doesn't have brandy. The doctors have warned him that brandy will be fatal."

"Harold, you are absolutely mistaken. Don't you understand that uncle has only this minute told me that he *must* have brandy?"

And she again approached the glass to the pale lips of the old man. His tasselled Turkish smoking-cap had fallen to the floor, and the hemisphere of his bald head glittered under the gas.

"Maud, I forbid you!" And Harold put a hand on the glass. "It's a matter of life and death. You must have misunderstood uncle."

"It was you who misunderstood uncle," said Maud. "Of course, if you mean to prevent me by brute force ——"

They both paused and glanced at Daniel, and then at each other.

"Perhaps you are right, dearest," said Harold, in a new tone.

"No, dearest," said Maud, also in the new tone. "I expect you are right. I must have misunderstood."

"No, no, Maud. Give him the brandy by all means. I've no doubt you're right."

"But if you think I'd better not give it him ——"

"But I would prefer you to give it him, dearest. It isn't likely you would be mistaken in a thing like that."

"I would prefer to be guided by you, dearest," said Maud.

So they went on for several minutes, each giving way to the other in the most angelic manner.

"And meantime I'm supposed to be dying, am I?" roared Uncle Dan, suddenly sitting up. "You'd let th' old uncle peg out while you practise his precepts! A nice pair you make! I thought for see which on ye 'ud give way to th' other, but I didna' anticipate as both on ye 'ud be ready to sacrifice my life for th' sake o' domestic peace."

"But, uncle," they both said later, amid the uni-

versal and yet rather shamefaced peace rejoicings, "you said *nothing* was worth a quarrel."

"And I said right," answered Dan; "I said right. "Th' Divorce Court is full o' fools as have begun married life by trying to convince the other fool, instead o' humouring him — or *her*. Kiss us, Maud."

THE MURDER OF THE MANDARIN

I

"WHAT'S that you're saying about murder?" asked Mrs. Cheswardine as she came into the large drawing-room, carrying the supper-tray.

"Put it down here," said her husband, referring to the supper-tray, and pointing to a little table which stood two legs off and two legs on the hearthrug.

"That apron suits you immensely," murmured Woodruff, the friend of the family, as he stretched his long limbs into the fender towards the fire, further even than the long limbs of Cheswardine. Each man occupied an easy-chair on either side of the hearth; each was very tall, and each was forty.

Mrs. Cheswardine, with a whisk infinitely graceful, set the tray on the table, took a seat behind it on a chair that looked like a toddling grand-nephew of the arm-chairs, and nervously smoothed out the apron.

As a matter of fact, the apron did suit her immensely. It is astounding, delicious, adorable, the effect of a natty little domestic apron suddenly put on over an elaborate and costly frock, especially when you can hear the rustle of a silk petticoat beneath,

and more especially when the apron is smoothed out by jewelled fingers. Every man knows this. Every woman knows it. Mrs. Cheswardine knew it. In such matters Mrs. Cheswardine knew exactly what she was about. She delighted, when her husband brought Woodruff in late of a night, as he frequently did after a turn at the club, to prepare with her own hands — the servants being in bed — a little snack of supper for them. Tomato sandwiches, for instance, miraculously thin, together with champagne or Bass. The men preferred Bass, naturally, but if Mrs. Cheswardine had a fancy for a sip of champagne out of her husband's tumbler, Bass was not forthcoming.

To-night it was champagne.

Woodruff opened it, as he always did, and involuntarily poured out a libation on the hearth, as he almost always did. Good-natured, ungainly, long-suffering men seldom achieve the art of opening champagne.

Mrs. Cheswardine tapped her pink-slippered foot impatiently.

"You're all nerves to-night," Woodruff laughed, and "you've made me nervous." And at length he got some of the champagne into a tumbler.

"No, I'm not," Mrs. Cheswardine contradicted him.

"Yes, you are, Vera," Woodruff insisted calmly.

She smiled. The use of that elegant Christian name, with its faint suggestion of Russian archduchesses, had a strange effect on her, particularly

from the lips of Woodruff. She was proud of it, and of her surname too — one of the oldest surnames in the Five Towns. The syllables of "Vera" invariably soothed her, like a charm. Woodruff, and Cheswardine also, had called her Vera during the whole of her life; and she was thirty. They had all three lived in different houses at the top end of Trafalgar Road, Bursley. Woodruff fell in love with her first, when she was eighteen, but with no practical results. He was a brown-haired man, personable despite his ungainliness, but he failed to perceive that to worship from afar off is not the best way to capture a young woman with large eyes and an emotional disposition. Cheswardine, who had a black beard, simply came along and married the little thing. She fluttered down on to his shoulders like a pigeon. She adored him, feared him, cooed to him, worried him, and knew that there were depths of his mind which she would never plumb. Woodruff, after being best man, went on loving, meekly and yet philosophically, and found his chief joy in just these suppers. The arrangement suited Vera; and as for the husband and the hopeless admirer, they had always been fast friends.

"I asked you what you were saying about murder," said Vera sharply, "but it seems ——"

"Oh! did you?" Woodruff apologised. "I was saying that murder isn't such an impossible thing as it appears. Any one might commit a murder."

"Then you want to defend Harrisford? Do you hear what he says, Stephen?"

The notorious and terrible Harrisford murders were agitating the Five Towns that November. People read, talked, and dreamt murder; for several weeks they took murder to all their meals.

"He doesn't want to defend Harrisford at all," said Cheswardine, with a superior masculine air, "and of course any one might commit a murder. I might."

"Stephen! How horrid you are!"

"You might, even!" said Woodruff, gazing at Vera.

"Charlie! Why, the blood alone ——"

"There isn't always blood," said the oracular husband.

"Listen here," proceeded Woodruff, who read variously and enjoyed philosophical speculation. "Supposing that by just taking thought, by just wishing it, an Englishman could kill a mandarin in China and make himself rich for life, without anybody knowing anything about it! How many mandarins do you suppose there would be left in China at the end of a week?"

"At the end of twenty-four hours, rather," said Cheswardine grimly.

"Not one," said Woodruff.

"But that's absurd," Vera objected, disturbed. When these two men began their philosophical discussions they always succeeded in disturbing her. She hated to see life in a queer light. She hated to think.

"It isn't absurd," Woodruff replied. "It simply

shows that what prevents wholesale murder is not the wickedness of it, but the fear of being found out, and the general mess, and seeing the corpse, and so on."

Vera shuddered.

"And I'm not sure," Woodruff proceeded, "that murder is so very much more wicked than lots of other things."

"Usury, for instance," Cheswardine put in.

"Or bigamy," said Woodruff.

"But an Englishman *couldn't* kill a mandarin in China by just wishing it," said Vera, looking up.

"How do we know?" said Woodruff, in his patient voice. "How do we know? You remember what I was telling you about thought-transference last week. It was in *Borderland*."

Vera felt as if there was no more solid ground to stand on, and it angered her to be plunging about in a bog.

"I think it's simply silly," she remarked. "No, thanks."

She said "No, thanks" to her husband, when he tendered his glass.

He moved the glass still closer to her lips.

"I said 'No, thanks,'" she repeated drily.

"Just a mouthful," he urged.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Then you'd better go to bed," said he.

He had a habit of sending her to bed abruptly. She did not dislike it. But she had various ways of going. To-night it was the way of an archduchess.

II

Woodruff, in stating that Vera was all nerves that evening, was quite right. She was. And neither her husband nor Woodruff knew the reason.

The reason had to do most intimately with frocks.

Vera had been married ten years. But no one would have guessed it, to watch her girlish figure and her birdlike ways. You see, she was the only child in the house. She often bitterly regretted the absence of offspring to the name and honour of Cheswardine. She envied other wives their babies. She doted on babies. She said continually that in her deliberate opinion the proper mission of women was babies. She was the sort of woman that regards a cathedral as a place built especially to sit in and dream soft domestic dreams; the sort of woman that adores music simply because it makes her dream. And Vera's brown studies, which were frequent, consisted chiefly of babies. But as babies amused themselves by coming down the chimneys of all the other houses in Bursley, and avoiding her house, she sought comfort in frocks. She made the best of herself. And it was a good best. Her figure was as near perfect as a woman's can be, and then there were those fine emotional eyes, and that fluttering-ness of the pigeon, and an ever-changing charm of gesture. Vera had become the best-dressed woman in Bursley. And that is saying something. Her husband was wealthy, with an increasing income, though, of course, as an earthenware manufacturer,

and the son and grandson of an earthenware manufacturer, he joined heartily in the general Five Towns lamentation that there was no longer any money to be made out of "pots." He liked to have a well-dressed woman about the house, and he allowed her an incredible allowance, the amount of which was breathed with awe among Vera's friends; a hundred a year, in fact. He paid it to her quarterly, by cheque. Such was his method.

Now a ball was to be given by the members of the Ladies' Hockey Club (or such of them as had not been maimed for life in the pursuit of this noble pastime) on the very night after the conversation about murder. Vera belonged to the Hockey Club (in a purely ornamental sense), and she had procured a frock for the ball which was calculated to crown her reputation as a mirror of elegance. The skirt had — but no (see the columns of the *Staffordshire Signal* for the 9th November, 1901). The mischief was that the gown lacked, for its final perfection, one particular thing, and that particular thing was separated from Vera by the glass front of Brunt's celebrated shop at Hanbridge. Vera could have managed without it. The gown would still have been brilliant without it. But Vera had seen it, and she *wanted* it.

Its cost was a guinea.

Well, you will say, what is a guinea to a dainty creature with a hundred a year? Let her go and buy the article. The point is that she couldn't, because she had only six and sevenpence left in the

wide world. (And six weeks to Christmas!) She had squandered — oh, soul above money! — twenty-five pounds, and more than twenty-five pounds, since the 29th of September. Well, you will say, credit, in other words, tick? No, no, no! The giant Stephen absolutely and utterly forbade her to procure anything whatever on credit. She was afraid of him. She knew just how far she could go with Stephen. He was great and terrible. Well, you will say, why couldn't she blandish and cajole Stephen for a sovereign or so? Impossible! She had a hundred a year on the clear understanding that it was never exceeded nor anticipated. Well, you will discreetly hint, there are certain devices known to housewives. . . . Hush! Vera had already employed them. Six and sevenpence was not merely all that remained to her of her dress allowance; it was all that remained to her of her household allowance till the next Monday.

Hence her nerves.

There that poor unfortunate woman lay, with her unconscious tyrant of a husband snoring beside her, desolately wakeful under the night-light in the large, luxurious bedroom — three servants sleeping overhead, champagne in the cellar, furs in the wardrobe, valuable lace round her neck at that very instant, grand piano in the drawing-room, horses in the stable, stuffed bear in the hall — and her life was made a blank for want of fourteen and fivepence! And she had nobody to confide in. How true it is that the human soul is solitary, that con-

tent is the only true riches, and that to be happy we must be good!

It was at that juncture of despair that she thought of mandarins. Or rather — I may as well be frank — she had been thinking of mandarins all the time since retiring to rest. There *might* be something in Charlie's mandarin theory. . . . According to Charlie, so many queer, inexplicable things happened in the world. Occult — subliminal — astral — thought-waves. These expressions and many more occurred to her as she recollected Charlie's disconcerting conversations. There *might*. . . . One never knew.

Suddenly she thought of her husband's pockets, bulging with silver, with gold, and with bank-notes. Tantalising vision! No! She could not steal. Besides, he might wake up.

And she returned to mandarins. She got herself into a very morbid and two-o'clock-in-the-morning state of mind. Suppose it was a dodge that *did* work. (Of course, she was extremely superstitious; we all are.) She began to reflect seriously upon China. She remembered having heard that Chinese mandarins were very corrupt; that they ground the faces of the poor, and put innocent victims to the torture; in short, that they were sinful and horrid persons, scoundrels unfit for mercy. Then she pondered upon the remotest parts of China, regions where Europeans never could penetrate. No doubt there was some unimportant mandarin, somewhere in these regions, to whose district his death would

be a decided blessing, to kill whom would indeed be an act of humanity. Probably a mandarin without wife or family; a bachelor mandarin whom no relative would regret; or, in the alternative, a mandarin with many wives, whose disgusting polygamy merited severe punishment! An old mandarin already pretty nearly dead; or, in the alternative, a young one just commencing a career of infamy!

"I'm awfully silly," she whispered to herself. "But still, if there *should* be anything in it. And I must, I must, I must have that thing for my dress!"

She looked again at the dim forms of her husband's clothes, pitched anyhow on an ottoman. No! She could not stoop to theft!

So she murdered a mandarin; lying in bed there; not any particular mandarin, a vague mandarin, the madarin most convenient and suitable under all the circumstances. She deliberately wished him dead, on the off-chance of acquiring riches, or, more accurately, because she was short of fourteen and fivepence in order to look perfectly splendid at a ball.

In the morning when she woke up — her husband had already departed to the works — she thought how foolish she had been in the night. She did not feel sorry for having desired the sudden death of a fellow-creature. Not at all. She felt sorry because she was convinced, in the cold light of day, that the charm would not work. Charlie's notions were really too ridiculous, too preposterous. No! She must reconcile herself to wearing a ball dress which was less than perfection, and all for want of four-

teen and fivepence. And she had more nerves than ever!

She had nerves to such an extent that when she went to unlock the drawer of her own private toilet-table, in which her prudent and fussy husband forced her to lock up her rings and brooches every night, she attacked the wrong drawer — an empty unfastened drawer that she never used. And lo! the empty drawer was not empty. There was a sovereign lying in it!

This gave her a start, connecting the discovery, as naturally at the first blush she did, with the mandarin.

Surely it couldn't be, after all.

Then she came to her senses. What absurdity! A coincidence, of course, nothing else! Besides, a mere sovereign! It wasn't enough. Charlie had said "rich for life." The sovereign must have lain there for months and months, forgotten.

However, it was none the less a sovereign. She picked it up, thanked Providence, ordered the dog-cart, and drove straight to Brunt's. The particular thing that she acquired was an exceedingly thin, slim, and fetching silver belt — a marvel for the money, and the ideal waist decoration for her wonderful white muslin gown. She bought it, and left the shop.

And as she came out of the shop, she saw a street urchin holding out the poster of the early edition of the *Signal*. And she read on the poster, in large letters: "DEATH OF LI HUNG CHANG." It is no exaggeration to say that she nearly fainted.

Only by the exercise of that hard self-control, of which women alone are capable, did she refrain from tumbling against the blue-clad breast of Adams, the Cheswardine coachman.

She purchased the *Signal* with well-feigned calm, opened it and read: "*Stop-press news. Pekin. Li Hung Chang, the celebrated Chinese statesman, died at two o'clock this morning.— Reuter.*"

III

Vera reclined on the sofa that afternoon, and the sofa was drawn round in front of the drawing-room fire. And she wore her fluffiest and languidest *peignoir*. And there was a perfume of eau de Cologne in the apartment. Vera was having a headache; she was having it in her grand, her official manner. Stephen had had to lunch alone. He had been told that in all probability his suffering wife would not be well enough to go to the ball. Whereupon he had grunted. As a fact, Vera's headache was extremely real, and she was very upset indeed.

The death of Li Hung Chang was heavily on her soul. Occultism was justified of itself. The affair lay beyond coincidence. She had always *known* that there was something in occultism, supernaturalism, so-called superstitions, what not. But she had never expected to prove the faith that was in her by such a homicidal act on her own part. It was detestable of Charlie to have mentioned the thing at all. He had no right to play with fire. And as for her husband, words could give but the merest rough out-

line of her resentment against Stephen. A pretty state of things that a woman with a position such as she had to keep up should be reduced to six and sevenpence! Stephen, no doubt, expected her to visit the pawnshop. It would serve him right if she did so — and he met her coming out under the three brass balls! Did she not dress solely and wholly to please him? Not in the least to please herself! Personally she had a mind set on higher things, impossible aspirations. But he liked fine clothes. And it was her duty to satisfy him. She strove to satisfy him in all matters. She lived for him. She sacrificed herself to him completely. And what did she get in return? Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! All men were selfish. And women were their victims. . . . Stephen, with his silly bullying rules against credit and so forth. . . . The worst of men was that they had no sense.

She put a new dose of eau de Cologne on her forehead, and leaned on one elbow. On the mantelpiece lay the tissue parcel containing the slim silver belt, the price of Li's death. She wanted to stick it in the fire. And only the fact that it would not burn prevented her savagely doing so. There was something wrong, too, with the occultism. To receive a paltry sovereign for murdering the greatest statesman of the Eastern hemisphere was simply grotesque. Moreover, she had most distinctly not wanted to deprive China of a distinguished man. She had expressly stipulated for an inferior and insignificant mandarin, one that could be spared and

that was unknown to Reuter. She supposed she ought to have looked up China at the Wedgwood Institution and selected a definite mandarin with a definite place of residence. But could she be expected to go about a murder deliberately like that?

With regard to the gross inadequacy of the fiscal return for her deed, perhaps that was her own fault. She had not wished for more. Her brain had been so occupied by the belt that she had wished only for the belt. But, perhaps, on the other hand, vast wealth was to come. Perhaps something might occur that very night. That would be better. Yet would it be better? However rich she might become, Stephen would coolly take charge of her riches, and dole them out to her, and make rules for her concerning them. And besides, Charlie would suspect her guilt. Charlie understood her, and perused her thoughts far better than Stephen did. She would never be able to conceal the truth from Charlie. The conversation, the death of Li within two hours, and then a sudden fortune accruing to her — Charlie would inevitably put two and two together and divine her shameful secret.

The outlook was thoroughly black anyway.

She then fell asleep.

When she awoke, some considerable time afterwards, Stephen was calling to her. It was his voice, indeed, that had aroused her. The room was dark.

"I say, Vera," he demanded, in a low, slightly inimical tone, "have you taken a sovereign out of the empty drawer in your toilet-table?"

"No," she said quickly, without thinking.

"Ah!" he observed reflectively, "I knew I was right." He paused, and added, coldly, "If you aren't better you ought to go to bed."

Then he left her, shutting the door with a noise that showed a certain lack of sympathy with her headache.

She sprang up. Her first feeling was one of thankfulness that their brief interview had occurred in darkness. So Stephen was aware of the existence of the sovereign! The sovereign was not occult. Possibly he had put it there. And what did he know he was "right" about?

She lighted the gas, and gazed at herself in the glass, realising that she no longer had a headache, and endeavouring to arrange her ideas.

"What's this?" said another voice at the door. She glanced round hastily, guiltily. It was Charlie.

"Steve telephoned me you were too ill to go to the dance," explained Charlie, "so I thought I'd come and make inquiries. I quite expected to find you in bed with a nurse and a doctor or two at least. What is it?" He smiled.

"Nothing," she replied. "Only a headache. It's gone now."

She stood against the mantelpiece, so that he should not see the white parcel.

"That's good," said Charlie.

There was a pause.

"Strange, Li Hung Chang dying last night, just after we had been talking about killing mandarins,"

she said. She could not keep off the subject. It attracted her like a snake, and she approached it in spite of the fact that she fervently wished not to approach it.

"Yes," said Charlie. "But Li wasn't a mandarin, you know. And he didn't die after we had been talking about mandarins. He died before."

"Oh! I thought it said in the paper he died at two o'clock this morning."

"Two a. m. in Pekin," Charlie answered. "You must remember that Pekin time is many hours earlier than our time. It lies so far eastward."

"Oh!" she said again.

Stephen hurried in, with a worried air.

"She isn't absolutely dying, I find," said Charlie, turning to Vera: "You are going to the dance after all — aren't you?"

"I say, Vera," Stephen interrupted, "either you or I must have a scene with Martha. I've always suspected that confounded housemaid. So I put a marked sovereign in a drawer this morning, and it was gone at lunch-time. She'd better hook it instantly. Of course I shan't prosecute."

"Martha!" cried Vera. "Stephen, what on earth are you thinking of? I wish you would leave the servants to me. If you think you can manage this house in your spare time from the works, you are welcome to try. But don't blame me for the consequences." Glances of triumph flashed in her eyes.

"But I tell you ——"

"Nonsense," said Vera. "I took the sovereign. I saw it there and I took it, and just to punish you, I've spent it. It's not at all nice to lay traps for servants like that."

"Then why did you tell me just now you hadn't taken it?" Stephen demanded crossly.

"I didn't feel well enough to argue with you then," Vera replied.

"You've recovered precious quick," retorted Stephen with grimness.

"Of course, if you want to make a scene before strangers," Vera whimpered (poor Charlie a stranger!), "I'll go to bed."

Stephen knew when he was beaten.

She went to the Hockey dance, though. She and Stephen and Charlie and his young sister, aged seventeen, all descended together to the Town Hall in a brougham. The young girl admired Vera's belt excessively, and looked forward to the moment when she too should be a bewitching and captivating wife like Vera, in short, a woman of the world, worshipped by grave, bearded men. And both the men were under the spell of Vera's incurable charm, capricious, surprising, exasperating, indefinable, indispensable to their lives.

"Stupid superstitions!" reflected Vera. "But of course I never believed it really."

And she cast down her eyes to gloat over the belt.

THE END

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